

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

 frillyfujoshitranslations.tumblr.com/post/126159559247/akaya-akashiya-ayakashino-kagekui-machi-no

*****translator's note:** *This is the novelization of the HaccaWorks* visual novel Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino. There are spoilers for the game pretty early on. If you intend on playing the game, and don't want spoilers, I would not read this novel translation.*

A woman let out a moan. It was somewhat similar to the cry of a night monkey, or the creaking of an old door. The light was one candle. Shrouded in viscous humidity, the steamy smell of soft rush arose. Even though the night wind shook the sliding paper door at times, the swaying light of the candle didn't move. The pendulum clock on the wall ticked away the time with a harsh sound. In the middle of the room was something arranged on the floor. A woman was clinging to a futon with her thin arms. She was the one who let out the moan from earlier.

"That's right, just a little more."

A black shadow said to encourage her as it propped her up. The woman's body trembled—she let out an even louder scream. Her thick hair clung to her forehead. Two pale legs stuck out from the hem of a disheveled white yukata. The black shadow reached between them—and swiftly delivered a reddish black mass. The crimson blood and lukewarm water soaked into the birthing confinement.

".....uwh."

"Fufu.....you gave birth."

When the surface of the water rippled in the metal basin to the side, the light from the candle reflecting on it scattered. The child's faint crying gradually became louder. When the long string-like umbilical cord was cut by someone else, the baby's crying became even louder.

"Welcome, little one."

The shadow said, then swaddled the baby and placed it on the woman's chest. It had thin arms and thin legs. The small creature that even now looked as if it could break, clung to its mother's breast.

"Uwh, uwh."

The woman unable to form words let out a moan, then smiled a faint, weak smile. No one saw the woman's face.

"You're.....'s child, aren't you."

The black shadow said. There was no reply.

"Now then, I need to tell....."

The shadow said as it left the room after the usual cleanup was skillfully completed and the woman's clothes adjusted. The baby's voice could be heard for a while, but eventually even that ceased.

It was a moonlit night. The woman was very tired, but she stared at the graining in the ceiling boards that formed spiraled patterns in the wood without sleeping.

He couldn't sleep. This was the first time Tougo Tsubaki knew what it felt like to feel a strange restlessness in his chest. He tossed and turned countless times in his futon, and when had enough of that, he tried opening the window.

It was an early spring night with a strong wind. The force of the wind blew by in an instant, and took away Tougo's body warmth from under his pajamas. Since there was a full moon, the sky was a bright indigo blue, and the scattered clouds looked as if there were white lights glowing around them. He could even see the outline of the mountain range from his room. It was so clear it didn't even seem like it was night. Tougo would always watch those shadows. Those shadows sinking into the night made Tougo remember his mother who disappeared. It had already been a month. He wondered what his mother—Akane, who was pregnant at the time, was doing now. Not knowing where she may have disappeared to, the adults talked about all the possibilities, but if they weren't able to find her no matter where they searched, then it was all the same to him. Tougo loved being called to by his mother. He thought about her gentle, soft voice. She'd stroke his head with her pale, slender hand. Feeling somewhat embarrassed by it, he hated it, but also liked it. Tougo knew he'd never get that back. He would never be able to touch that hand, or hear that voice ever again. He knew those were far off in the distance. There was nothing Tougo, as a child, could do about it.

It was some time before. Akane called to Tougo. *Look, it's moving, see?* When he pat the woman's round extended belly where a baby resided, it moved slightly. The woman—Akane, addressed Tougo. She grabbed his small hand and placed it on her stomach. He felt another small movement.

"It moved."

Tougo looked at his own hand.

"That's right. It's in here, it's saying it'll be coming out soon."

"Soon? Hey, when is that going to be?"

"Around the new year, so just a little longer."

Tougo looked back at his mother, and once again rubbed her stomach. He felt his mother's body warmth underneath her loose maternity clothes.

"I see. Heh heh, I can't wait, Akane."

"Right?"

"Hey, is it a boy? Or a girl?"

"It could be either. Tougo is a boy, so I guess I'd like a girl. Which would you prefer, Tougo?"

".....I'm fine with either. Since they're going to be my sibling."

The season was changing from late fall to winter. The tree branches made a flute-like sound in the strong winds.

"We can be together until the new year."

Akane muttered, but Tougo was distracted by the sound of something falling over outside of the window, and didn't hear those words.

"This child will protect you, Tougo."

Tougo turned around, moved away from the window and approached Akane.

"This baby? Okay, then I'll protect them too. Them, and you too, Akane."

"Thanks."

Akane smiled. Ending at that point, silence fell upon the room. The kerosene stove made a steady burning sound. The room was warm. Even though it was old, it was filled with a gentle presence. On top of the sun bleached tatami were several crayon drawings. On the support beam were traces of yearly height markings. The highest mark had ten years old written by it. It was difficult for Tougo, who was still just a fifth grader, to let it all sink in. Just, the idea of him getting a younger sister or a younger brother made him feel kind of proud, and kind of embarrassed. Being close to the winter solstice, the day ended with an early sunset.

“Now, let’s prepare dinner before Yaiichi gets home.”

Akane stood up, put on a pure white apron, and headed towards the kitchen.

“I’ll help too.”

Before he realized it, his cheeks were wet. His tears felt hot on his cheeks that were stinging from the cold wind. Even those immediately became cold. He rubbed his eyes hard then wiped off the back of his hands on his pajamas. Tougo sniffed a little and ended his thoughts. His head hurt because he had cried, so his thoughts cut off. He closed the window and slipped into the futon. It still had traces of a faint warmth and lured him to sleep. He didn’t have any dreams.

—this child will protect you, Tougo.

Those words remained in Tougo’s ears until the verge of sleep.

Yaiichi Tsubaki faced his writing desk in the living room that now functioned as his work room, and looked at his manuscript paper. Currently, he was in the handwritten literature business. The room fell into silence. It was as if he could even hear the dust gathering. The lead of the pencil in his hand was rather dull, but he was unable to make any progress with a brush at all. He scribbled a black line on the manuscript paper as if he were doodling. It had only been a month since his wife’s whereabouts had become unknown. Unable to stop his feelings of discouragement, he was constantly letting out sighs. Having his young son worry about him only spurred on Yaiichi’s feelings of worthlessness. He needed to pull himself together as a father, but as soon as he would scold himself, he didn’t have the will power to motivate himself.

“I wonder what you’re doing now.”

What could have made her do that, in her last month of pregnancy? Yaiichi didn’t know where she could have gone with that small life residing in her frail body. Just that, no matter how much Yaiichi tried to push it aside, reality somehow managed to strike him. Absentmindedly, he tried to remember all the people he had lost up until now. The parents that disappeared when he was young. The grandparents who took Yaiichi in and raised him when he became an orphan. The uncle that went missing on a stormy night. Even the mother of his childhood friend, who became his wife, disappeared on a windy autumn day. And then there was of course, the young man that was also his childhood friend. It happened several years before he got married. And then this time, it was his wife.

“I guess I really am no good, huh.....right, Akane-chan?”

Even though no one would talk about it, he could imagine that his wife was taken away by someone. If she had disappeared on her own, she would have had to come up with the idea herself. That wasn’t something Yaiichi could blame her for either. They got married at a young age that would still make society disapprove, and were blessed with a child. Even though living as a writer was unstable, he took on other jobs and somehow managed to support his wife and child. It was a life spent together with others. It felt like a dream to Yaiichi. He was so happy, he almost felt guilty. He may have been paying for all that good fortune now.

“I was really happy.”

He repeated with a sigh. On the opposite end of the hallway, he sensed his son waking up in his room. He hesitated checking on him, or saying something to him, and held back his own feelings. It was probably better to gently put it aside. That's what he thought, but it was also true that he didn't have the courage to face his son. He knew it would be a sleepless night for this child as well. Eventually he'll grow up and probably leave Yaiichi behind. He was still a young boy. His mother's disappearance broke his heart more than he let on. Yaiichi prayed that his son will never experience the loneliness of being left behind ever again.

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Chapter 1 Sounds of the Festival

Rattle, rattle, rattle.....

Rattle, rattle, rattle.....

The cold winter wind blew by, making the pinwheels spin vigorously. Round and round the red, red pinwheels went. The pinwheel vendor always came to the big winter festival to sell countless pinwheels. There were several of them lined up on both sides of the street, and every time the wind blew, they would all spin at once. Without fail, there were red pinwheels at the big festival every year. There were plenty of people walking down the street, grasping them in their hands. Even Tougo had one bought for him before. There were Japanese paper ones, cellophane ones. There were patterned ones, and ones with cut out shapes.....they all had slight variations in material and shape, but they were all made with a red base. The pinwheels were red because they mimicked the favorite flower of the fox goddess that was worshiped at the shrine outside of the town. That's what he had heard anyway. They were similar to the white fox goddess's favorite camellia flowers. Tougo had always thought the goddess was weird, since even though she was a fox, she liked flowers. They always wrote in picture guides that foxes were carnivores, and ate things like mice or rabbits. The favorite foods of foxes in the olden tales were usually things like fried tofu and inarizushi.

Red flowers, red pinwheels.

The lanterns were also red of course. Everything was red. It was suffocating Tougo a bit. It was as if the town, the whole world, had been buried in all the same color. The stall signs, the candied apples, the various decorative lamps, and the camellia flowers were all red. Even though he went to this event every year, Tougo felt vaguely uneasy and stopped his feet. The small soles of his shoes made a sound on the gravel walkway. Akane had gone two or three steps ahead of Tougo before noticing him, then turned around.

"What's the matter, Tougo?"

Her curly hair around her cheeks swayed gently. She wasn't wearing a scarf over her coat, so her pale neck was exposed. His mother that looked much younger than she actually was, knelt in front of Tougo who had gotten separated from her at some point, and took his hand.

"Your hands are cold. Here."

She wrapped her reddened fingers around his hands. Like her neck, her pale hands looked somewhat childish. She was often told she didn't look like a woman who had a child. The palms of her hands were only a little warmer than Tougo's.

"I'm fine, Akane."

"Mommy will give you hers. Here, put on these mittens."

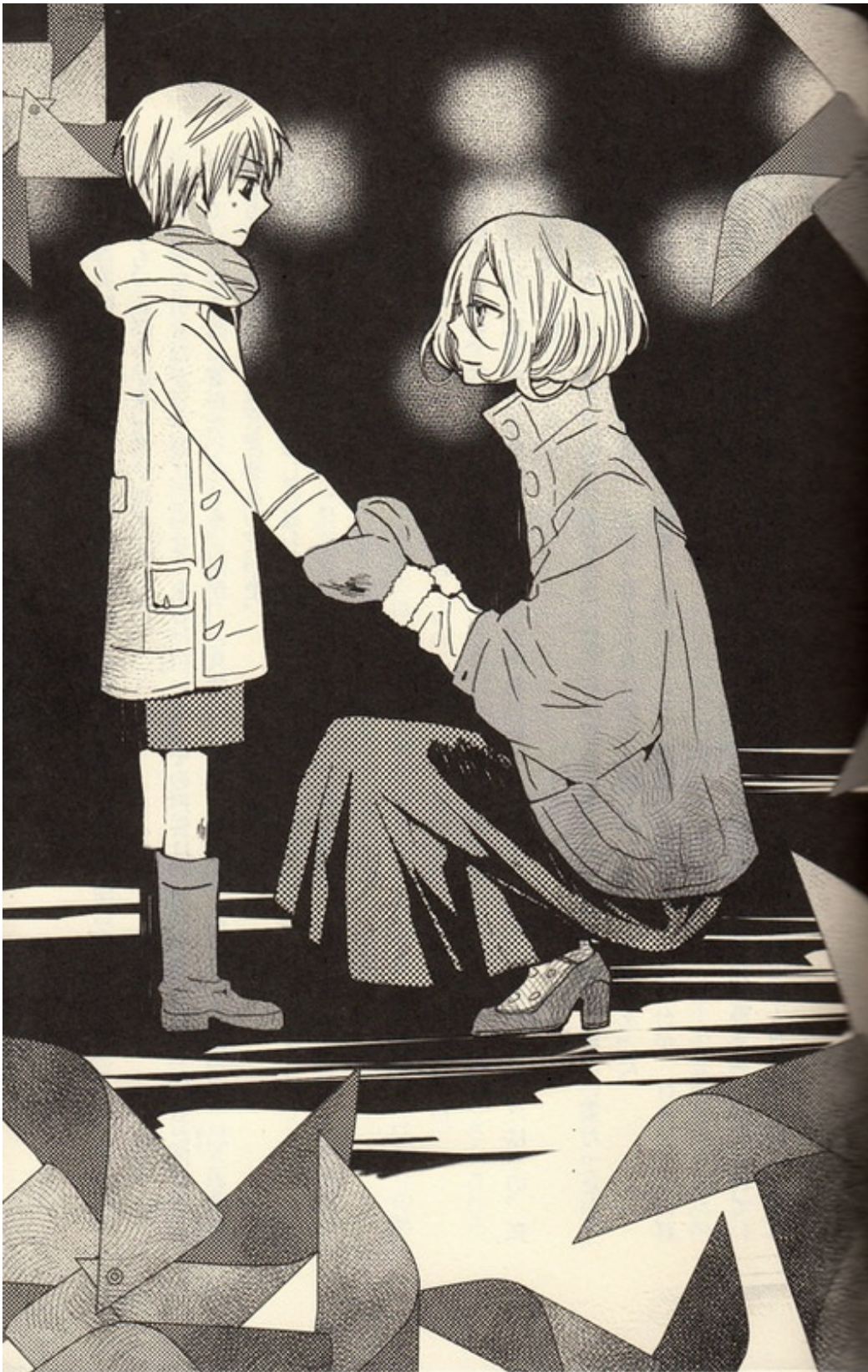
"I said I was fine. They're lame."

"What are you talking about? It's way better than these small hands being so red. Hey, do it for mommy."

".....guess I have no choice."

When he reluctantly agreed, Akane put both his small hands into the mittens. She took one of those hands and

started to walk again. The pinwheels spun on both sides of the street. The faint sound reached his ears even in the middle of the crowd. Everyone coming and going was having fun as the festival music was carried by the wind spinning the pinwheels.



“I got to go to the festival this year too, huh.”

Akane muttered to no one in particular as she pulled Tougo’s hand. Her tone seemed different from just the mood of

the season, and it made Tougo uneasy. He couldn't find the right words for it, but the way she sounded made him feel nostalgic, and sorrowful.

"You know, mommy used to beg for pinwheels all the time. Since they were so red and pretty."

"You did, Akane?"

"That's right."

".....I can't picture that."

"That's true. But, mommy was talking about when she was around Tougo's age. Ufufu, how nostalgic."

"They put on this festival back then too?"

"Yes. They've been putting it on even before my mom's mom's mom was born. This festival for the fox princess."

Even though the words she spoke to him were matter of fact, Tougo was unable to picture it. Since they were a family without a grandmother and grandfather, all he could do was vaguely imagine the existence of the mom of the mom Akane spoke of.

Once the pinwheels decorating each side of the path ended, he could see a stage assembled in the middle of an open area over the shoulders of the people coming and going. The stage was just a simple wooden structure with bonfires arranged at the four corners to illuminate the dancers. Since Tougo was still young he had to strain to see because of his height, but even though he was a little far away, he could see the show from above the heads in the crowd.

"Thank goodness. We're in time for the fox dance."

Tougo tightened his grip on Akane's hand so he wouldn't get lost. He was pulled forward by Akane who weaved a little forcefully through the crowd to get closer. The crowd was somewhat suffocating. It was as if everyone was crazy for the festival. Even though it was winter, the collar of the coat he was wearing was getting sweaty. Eventually, Akane stopped. Apparently they had made it to the front of the crowd surrounding the stage a little distance away from it. Akane pulled Tougo's hand once again and had him stand in front of her.

"Look, Tougo. The kagura."

Fresh air filled his lungs as Tougo took a deep breath. The sweat sticking to him from the heat of the crowd was exposed to the winter air and felt good. In his now clear view, he saw several musicians on stage with flutes, and taiko drums. In the middle of the stage, vigorously dancing across the floor, were foxes. It appeared to be a group of several dancers. When he turned to Akane, she was no longer looking at Tougo. Her body was bent over, and the hand that he was holding earlier was now resting on his shoulder, but her gaze followed the kagura. The flames on the firewood noisily blew upwards. It burned a little higher than the height of an adult, and when it received the February wind, it twisted with sparks scattering, its force never dying down. Every time the flames danced, the shadows on the stage transformed freely, they moved as if they had a will of their own, separate from the dancers. Only the foxes in the center were holding a camellia branch in each of their hands. Everyone on stage was wearing a white fox mask, and their white costumes were embroidered in gold and silver. The abstract crest-like designs dyed on each of their sleeves to their torsos were different for each dancer. Their exaggerated tails bounced following the movements of their dancing, along with their white wigs that moved up and down. Their movements were maddening, as if they were possessed. Tougo didn't know who choreographed this. Or what the story was. They looked as if they were suffering, but also as if they were laughing. Or, as if they were pretending to be crazy. The sounds of the kagura gradually became faster and more intense, the foxes all danced more aggressively as well. The branches cut through the air, the crimson camellia flowers looked as if they could fall off at any moment.

Actually, when he looked closely, there were several red petals falling onto the stage.

“Akane.”

Tougo suddenly started to feel uncomfortable. He felt an indescribable uneasiness sneak up on him out of nowhere.

“Hey, Akane.”

Already forgetting about the performance, Tougo grasped the rigid Akane’s sleeve. There was no response. He shook it as hard as he could, but Akane continued to watch the foxes. Her pale cheeks were dyed a bright red like the foxes illuminated by the flames. Akane paid no attention to Tougo. The maddening flute and taiko drums of the band resounded. Even though the stage was bright, the ground at his feet was dark. He couldn’t even tell if the lawn he was standing on earlier was still there now. His uneasiness summoned fear.

Akane, Akane.....

When he tried to call out to her over and over again, Tougo’s words, his voice, all vanished in vain. Suddenly, Akane’s hand moved. She didn’t notice Tougo at all. He got feverish as if he were ill. When he tried to stop her, Tougo’s restraint was made pointless by an unimaginable strength from her thin arms. It wasn’t Tougo reflected in Akane’s eyes.

“Aah, you’re here.”

“You came to a place to a place like this?”

When he turned around, there was a single fox. It was close to them, he wondered when it had come down from the stage.

“I’ve been waiting this whole time.”

The fox didn’t say anything.

“.....Akane? Hey, what’s wrong?”

The presences of the other foxes in the dancing group and the lamps were gone. A reddish black darkness enveloped Tougo, Akane and the fox.

“Ufufu.”

Tougo felt a cold chill down his back at her girlish laughter.

“You came to get me?”

Akane took a step toward the fox.

“Akane! Wait! Wait!!”

“Hey, I’ve been waiting this whole time.”

She took one step, then two steps. Tougo knew he could no longer stop Akane himself. The fox didn’t move from that spot.

“You said you’d take me with you this time.”

With a smile, Akane was gently consumed by the darkness.

“Akane.....”

Only Tougo’s voice remained quietly in the darkness.

—“Mom.”

“Hey, Tsubaki.”

He woke up when he was called to, and lifted his head. The darkness from earlier changed, his surroundings were suddenly bright. He blinked his eyes. His fuzzy vision gradually started to become clear. He saw his classmate there, staring at him.

“It’s rare for you to sleep during lunch. Speaking of which, no matter how much I called to you, you wouldn’t wake up at all.”

“Aah.....o-ow.”

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, my head just hurts a little.”

Tougo shook his head then looked around. It was lunch time, in his classroom, in the middle of winter. A kerosene stove was burning a little away from Tougo’s seat. Probably because it was cold outside, there were a lot of students in the classroom. After finishing their lunches they split off into several groups to chat with friends. There seemed to be voices enjoying a game of catch coming from the hallway. Inside the classroom was warm, almost to the point where wearing his uniform blazer made him feel hot. The color of the dull white curtains tied up around the windows and the cloudy weather outside looked as if they were blending together. Even though the classroom was bright, he was unable to shake off the dizziness he still felt from the vast difference between this reality while he was awake—and the heavy darkness of the dream he just had now.

Tougo was no longer that child who had been led by the hand, but a second year high school student, and his mother had been missing for quite some time. When he looked at the clock, it was only a few minutes before afternoon classes started. A few students came in and started to get ready. The students that came from other classes started to go back to their own classrooms.

“I was sleeping that deeply.....?”

“Guess you wouldn’t notice, huh. You were already sound asleep. Didn’t get much sleep?”

“Sound asleep.....”

Tougo thought about his classmate’s words.

“Did I say anything?”

“Huh? What? Do you mean like sleep talking?”

“.....never mind.....if I was quiet, then good.”

“I didn’t hear anything. Did you have a dream or something? By the way, you look pale. Will you be okay, shouldn’t you go to the nurse’s office?”

After asking him a bunch of questions, and offering to escort him, he reached out his hand towards Tougo’s forehead, but he dodged him by moving back a little.

“.....you just want to skip class, don’t you, Takahashi.”

“You caught me, huh.”

His classmate responded with a shocked tone then playfully stuck out his tongue.

“Well, don’t push yourself. Anyway, are you.....”

Takahashi’s words were interrupted by the sound of the classroom door opening. It seemed like the bell would ring at any moment.

Later, okay?

He said before going back to his desk a little away from Tougo. When he saw the figure of the person coming in, Tougo remembered the subject of fifth period. Japanese was tough, but he didn’t hate it. Even though his head was still fuzzy, he could probably get through class somehow. The footsteps stopped, and all talking ceased. The classroom was dead quiet. Since the windows were closed, the humid air filled his lungs like silk wadding. The middle aged teacher glanced at the students, gave a few lectures, and opened the text book. He was writing on the board a little heavily, so his white chalk started to wear down. As he rested his elbows on his desk with his face in his hands, he remembered that finals were soon. The teacher at the podium said something about the exam right at that moment. *This will definitely be on the finals*, he repeated as he tapped the board. The dust from the chalk against the deep green board fell in clumps with the impacts. With the pen he was gripping, he checked the example exam question that was just given.

“All right, that’s all for today. For those of you with after school classes, they start at four o’clock. Don’t go goofing off.”

“Huh~, but sensei, today’s the festival!”

The students who had the after school classes that were just announced raised their unhappy voices at the same time the bell rang.

“If it’s about the festival, it’ll be there next year, right?”

On that last note, the teacher left the classroom. Tougo was oddly convinced that was actually a reasonable response.

.....right.

Today was the day of the festival—that’s why he had that sort of dream. Because of this festival, from last year, this year, and every year. He remembered it every year: the memory of the day he went to the festival together with Akane. Even though he wanted to forget, he was never able to.....but, he wasn’t sure which parts of the incident were reality, and what was exaggerated, nevertheless, it was an unusually vivid.....memory from long ago.

“.....damn it.”

Even though he was used to the indescribable feelings that washed over him every time this major festival came by each February, he couldn’t understand it. Unable to find the reason behind the frustration beating him down, Tougo eventually laid his head down on his desk during the break. When sixth period and homeroom had ended, he started to get ready to go home when Takahashi came over. He seemed to have noticed Tougo putting his head down during the break after fifth period and left him alone.

“Hey, are you going to today’s festival?”

Of course the topic he put on hold during lunch was winter's big festival.

"Mizue and the others talked about going together, but what are you going to do? Come to think of it, isn't your house around there?"

"No, I don't live all that close to there. But I promised my sister I'd go with her."

"Sister?"

"She's still a kindergartener. Our family doesn't have a mother, and my dad seems to have a day off from work, so I also have to go."

"Aah.....I see, that must be hard for you. Well, since I'll be going once I get out of after school classes, I'll be there late."

"It's not really that difficult for me, but sorry as usual."

When Tougo apologized for not accepting his after school invitation, he pat his shoulder while telling him it was fine. He wasn't all that disappointed, but he wasn't disregarded either, this sort of distance was good enough for Tougo. He hated associating with others intimately. He liked the time he spent alone reading books, or listening to music over hanging out in groups.

"Well, it's a small town, so we may see each other at the festival."

"Right?"

"Well, I'm going home."

"Okay."

He stuffed his things into his bag, and left the classroom. He waved goodbye to a few of his classmates, including Takahashi. He headed toward the entrance to the hallway of the old concrete school building. Of course, most the voices he could hear were talking about the festival. This was one of the few things the majority of the residents of this town looked forward to. Certainly it was the same for Tougo when he was younger. He could vaguely remember how he felt when his mother would take him. If that incident had never occurred, he would have definitely innocently looked forward to it, and gone out with his friends, or with his sister pulling his hand, and fully enjoy this annual event. However, all he had now were bitter memories. Once he went outside after changing into his outside shoes, the winter wind carried the sound of the band. He could only vaguely hear the sound of the flutes and taiko drums. Tougo pulled out his headphones from his bag, put them on his ears, and sped up his pace.

The annual winter festival was held in a square a little away from the heart of the town. The area seemed to be a park loaned out by the land owners of the area, the Toochika family. Normally, people who weren't concerned about that kind of thing, like parents and children who'd go there to play, or elderly couples taking a stroll, considered it a place part of their everyday lives. Since the neighborhood kindergarten and elementary school often took field trips there, Tougo had also gone there several times for events. It was close to the shopping district in the center of town, so it was probably just an easy to get to location all around. The grounds were two minutes away from a river and pond. Other than that, around the spread out lawn were cultivated trees, and a footpath surrounding some simply constructed playground and athletic equipment. It was by no means tastefully arranged, but oddly enough, people never stopped coming out of habit. Even so, once a year, when it's the annual winter festival, the amount of people coming increases drastically. That's because a few weeks before the festival all the preparations are carried out by the shrine, and the Toochika family who coordinate all the festival rituals. Everyone in the neighborhood to those involved in the purification ceremony to the ones preparing the stalls from the shopping district, all felt the presence of the festival a month ahead of time. It was the season where nobody talked about anything else, but to Tougo, it

just signaled the arrival of a desolate season.

He had been told that the festival goddess that everyone prays to at Utsuwa Shrine to the east, comes to the sacred palanquin set up in the square from the shrine's inner sanctum. Utsuwa Shrine was located in a slightly elevated area of the mountain within Utsuwa town's city limits, and was enshrined in a cut off area by a long staircase. Even though it wasn't that big, and they didn't normally have many visitors, the grounds had a rustic atmosphere that was neither good nor bad. Even Tougo had gone there a few times, but when he did, he felt like he never saw anyone there other than the priest. That was a few years ago, so he didn't know what it was like now. In any case, during the annual festival that was often nicknamed the Camellia Festival, the town was illuminated all night by the paper lanterns and lights decorating it all throughout. Tougo could even watch them absentmindedly from his room. In the darkness of the night, they dimly sparkled only on the shrine grounds within the shadowy mountain range. Now, he could only look at them bitterly, but before, it used to frighten him.

Tougo walked, kicking up asphalt as he went. The time he promised to meet them was approaching. Normally, it was Tougo's responsibility to pick up his sister from kindergarten in the evenings, but today his dad arranged with his work to pick her up, so they could go on ahead to the festival. Tougo, who had been held back at school, arranged to meet them at the rest area set up in the middle of the venue. They decided on that place just in case his sister got tired. With all the benches there, it wouldn't be a problem. As he headed toward the square through the main street, the number of stalls and people increased. Inside of the crowd, he noticed the cheerful smiling faces of the people coming and going. The sun was already setting on this short winter day, and was turning the sky to the indigo blue of night. Even though it was still technically evening, the crimson paper lanterns strung up all around were a vivid bright red. Tougo concentrated on the sound his shoes made as he walked forward in order to try to change his mood. He was aware that the dream he had at noon was having a lasting negative effect on him. The dream about the mother that held Tougo's hand before she disappeared. His little sister who wasn't around at that time was now looking forward to today's outing with an innocent face. It seemed like his dad hadn't changed. He had that part of him that thoughtlessly took on several jobs, and that part of him that laughed to vaguely obscure his emotions.

"....."

He couldn't help being angry, and he was fully aware of that. He could understand why too. He was never a child who would throw a tantrum when he couldn't get what he wanted to begin with, nor did he have an especially attached personality, but even so, like a mist he was unable to swallow down, he felt completely helpless. His mother was gone. She left Tougo behind. She left his father behind. He should forget about it already. If he did, he could enjoy this festival every year with his sister and his dad. No matter how many times he told himself that, Tougo still dragged himself back into his helplessness.

There was a clock set up in an area with stairs a little higher than the rest of the walkway. All of the benches surrounded by flower beds were taken by other people who appeared to also be waiting with their cellphones in their hands, and checking the clock, as they looked for their companions. Tougo also stepped inside of there, looking for a small silhouette.

"Ah, oniichan!"

Noticing him first, Hina ran up to him. When he looked towards the voice, she was skillfully pushing her way through the crowd. She stopped next to Tougo, showing him her smiling face. She had cheek length layered hair, and one small ponytail tied up to the right of her forehead. She must have come straight from the kindergarten for it still be like that. Every time she bounced up and down, her ponytail swayed and the hem of her smock fluttered. Tougo took off his headphones and placed them around his neck as he replied to his sister.

"Hina, did I make you wait?"

"Nuh-uh! We just got here now too!"

She grabbed Tougo's arm jumping up and down repeatedly. He placed his hand on her head that only came to his hips, and patted it. *That tickles*, his sister laughed.

"Eheh heh, I hope you had a good day at school too, oniichan!"

"It wasn't really that great.....more importantly, where's Yaiichi?"

There was no way she could be here alone, so he looked for his dad, Yaiichi.

"Yacchi~? Yacchi's over there all depressed."

Hina called their dad by that nickname and pointed towards the direction she had come from. He saw his father in between the traffic of people. Once he noticed Tougo, he smiled faintly. He certainly had a dejected look on his face like Hina said.

"Hey, Tougo-kun. Did you have fun at school?"

".....not really. Don't ask me that every time."

"It's fine, isn't it? I'm curious, since I'm your dad and all."

He wasn't in elementary school anymore. Half-annoyed, they had this usual conversation all the time. Still, his father looked forward to his "same as usual" reply during these moments.

"Same as usual."

"I see. That's good."

This exchange had been going on for years, so he was used to it. As soon as he answered honestly, Hina pulled his sleeve.

"Hey, hey, oniichan, have you eaten anything?"

"Not yet. I came straight here."

"Okay, let's go buy something. What would you like to eat, Hina-chan?"

"Let's see, Hina wants.....baby castella, and cotton candy, and fried something, and then....."

"Hina-chan, that's all just sweets."

"But, dad, you said you would buy all of Hina's favorite things today."

"That's true, I did say I'd buy you what you'd like as an apology."

"Hm? You're guilty of something again, dad?"

"That's right. Dad dropped Hina's precious pinwheel!"

"Pinwheel?"

"Yeah. It was the same as the one oniichan has."

"When did that happen.....?"

"He lost it, isn't that terrible?"

"Did you look for it?"

"We retraced our steps before heading here."

"We didn't find it."

Hina said as she puffed out her cheeks. Yaichi made an even more troubled face.

"Hey, Hina-chan. Do you want to go back to the pinwheel booth?"

"No way. The old man at the booth said that was the last one."

It sounded like the shop keeper had told them it was the only one like it left in their warehouse, since it was a special item. That meant any other one was the wrong one. Even though Tougo didn't get it, this was Hina's argument, and the sole reason for his father's troubled expression. It probably wasn't a lie that he dropped it while he was spacing out. Tougo assumed that his father, who was normally clumsy, was pushing himself today. Since it was difficult to support children with only his principal occupation as a writer, Yaichi took on several short term part-time jobs. With his late nights, and early mornings, he didn't get much rest. On top of that, they were a single parent household. Tougo took on more household responsibilities compared to most boys his age, but even so, his father's burden of supporting them was heavy.

"Hina, where did you go after buying that pinwheel?"

"Uuum....."

Hina tried to remember her main stops on her route after the pinwheel stall, and told them to Tougo. From the yoyo fishing stall, they got takoyaki, then a corndog.

And then, and then.....

Every time they bought something, she thoroughly recalled everything that happened there. Every once in a while she'd confirm with Yaichi. Tougo nodded to each little thing, then stood up.

"Got it."

"Tougo-kun?"

Tougo started to walk away, leaving those two to wonder what he was doing. He looked over his shoulder.

"I'm going to look for it one more time, so you guys keep looking around the festival."

Tougo heard Hina call out, *oniichan*, from behind him, but he had already started to weave through the crowd. As he thought back on Hina's explanation, Tougo looked carefully around the feet of the crowd. All he saw were the fluttering sleeves of their coats, and the clouds of dust coming from the soles of their shoes, as people came and went. The decorative lighting barely reached the ground, so the gravel road was dark as expected. People bumping into his bag made it difficult to walk. Since the rows of stalls were usually the same shops in the same place every year, it wasn't hard to track the path Hina and his dad had taken.

However, when he asked himself why he was even doing this, Tougo didn't have an answer. Why did he need to care so much about an item that cost no more than a few hundred yen? Hina's bad mood and fussiness about it was just her childish selfishness after all. Tougo and Yaichi both spoiled Hina, but even so, if he had chided her, saying there was nothing they could do, give it up, she would have been satisfied. Tougo had his own reason for not doing that.

I don't want to let it go, I want to get it back, he thought. It didn't have much to do with it, but losing something at a festival overlapped with Tougo's own past. His mother's disappearance, the cherished feelings he and his dad had about her—and the fox that took his mother by her hand. It'd be nice if I could laugh it off like a child's lost toy, he thought bitterly in his heart. He felt guilty raining on Hina's parade after she had been looking forward to today's festival so much over the past few days. So he would help her, even though he felt down, he couldn't stop now, so he walked on as he kept an eye on the ground at the crowd's feet.

The sound of the band's flutes became louder and louder. He started at the place that had the pinwheels in stock, circled around the outside of the square then came back to his starting point. As time went on, the crowd became even larger and made his search difficult. A mother pulling her child by the hand went by his eyes. A young boy chasing after his speed walking mother, and the fluttering hem of a black velveteen skirt passed Tougo. As they passed by, he felt as though the fox mask around the boy's neck was looking right at him, and made his heart beat loudly. It felt as though all of his hair was standing on end.

“.....kh.”

He was speechless as that form overlapped with the one in his dream from the afternoon. Was he hallucinating, or was it just a coincidental resemblance? The maddening flutes and taiko drums agitated Tougo even more. The sweat sticking to him under his winter clothes felt damp and uncomfortable. At that moment, a strong wind noticeably cooled his feverish neck. It felt good against his flushed skin. Tougo narrowed his eyes. I'm thinking too much, he told himself. This happened every year, he should forget about it already. He couldn't change the past.

The pinwheels spun with a rattling sound. They were all red, made of Japanese paper and plastic. There were a number of people looking at the well-arranged line up as they chatted cheerfully. There were also people pointing out the ones they wanted to buy to the shopkeeper. Hina must have also asked Yaiichi for one the same way. The red pinwheels were camellia flowers. They were the favorite flower of the fox goddess of Utsuwa's mountain. Since the white fox goddess with the small form of a princess wished for it, the winter festival was decorated all over with the color red.

—aren't they pretty, Tougo? The princess should be pleased this year too. Or maybe.....she's waiting for someone to come to her.....

Tougo lowered his head as he remembered Akane's voice. Even with his head down, all he saw were pinwheels.

Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle

Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle

Their sound that should have been faint echoed loudly in his ears. Unable to block the sound, Tougo froze.

“Hey, you.”

He had been called to a few times. When he lifted his face, a puzzled look to his unresponsiveness faced him.

“Hey.”

“.....what?”

He was probably around his age. He had fair skin and a slender body, but he was unmistakably a boy. He was wearing a pure white short sleeved shirt with a red pattern dyed onto it, and geta on his bare feet. Both were unsuitable for the season. Around his neck was a red scarf. His pants kind of looked like they were school clothes, but they were a design he had never seen before. All the kids around this area went to Utsuwa High School, so he rarely had the opportunity to see uniforms outside of their own. Lastly, he was wearing a fox mask slanted on his head that was just as standard at this festival as the pinwheels. As soon as Tougo acknowledged him, he smiled

gently. Even though everything about him looked as if he had escaped from an ukiyo-e print, his narrowed golden eyes when he smiled gave off a friendly impression.

“Thank goodness, it looks like he heard me.”

It looked like the boy in front of Tougo was facing a small black creature on his shoulder. Being called to repeatedly, Tougo was annoyed by the way he spoke. He had never seen him before. At the very least, Tougo didn't know him. What did he want with him?

“Hey, is that pinwheel that fell over there yours?”

Seeming not to notice Tougo's skepticism, the boy pointed at his feet. At Tougo's feet was a red pinwheel that had fallen about thirty centimeters away from the stand. Tougo seemed to not have noticed it until now there in the darkness of the bushes.

“.....ah.”

That's definitely the one Hina dropped, Tougo thought. It fit all of its characteristics. Even the stall owner didn't seem to notice it either. Taking Tougo's surprise as his answer, the boy picked up the pinwheel and dusted it off. He suddenly dropped his gaze as it spun round and round in his hand. When he lifted his face, he held out that hand.

“.....here. It's a little dirty, but it's all right.”

“.....”

Tougo also started to reach his hand out to grab it, but stopped. A small feeling of discomfort got caught in his throat.

“It's a good thing I found it. It's important to you, right?”

Discomfort. —No, déjà vu.



“—.....Yoshiki.”

“Huh?”

“.....nothing.”

The boy took another step toward him. The distance between the two of them became even smaller.

—*Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle*

The pinwheels were spinning. The ones at the stall and the one in the boy's hand.

"Isn't that great?"

The smiling boy's face and the face of another person overlapped. Tougo felt dizzy. He was clearly a different person. Even so—why was he remembering him?

"Hey, you.are you all right?"

The moment he looked into his face, Tougo brushed his hand away.

"!"

".....it's not mine."

"Huh?"

"You have the wrong person."

This time the boy showed a surprised face. He stared at the boy who was picking up the pinwheel that fell when he had swiped at his hand in response. The boy seemed to take the words that Tougo should have been saying to himself, as he must have been mistaken, and said sorry disappointed. His behavior that wasn't upset at all made Tougo even more annoyed. Unable to bear his unnecessary feelings of irritation, he turned away. He'd probably never see him again.

"Hey."

".....there's still something else?"

"Do you hate them?"

Before he could even ask "what", the boy continued.

"The pinwheels. You were glaring at them this whole time."

He hadn't thought that at all.

"Not really."

He just felt uncomfortable, as if this boy was stepping into his inner thoughts without permission. It may have been the words he received from this person he didn't know at all, or the fact that he may not have even noticed how he felt.even though he should have been completely unknown to him, why did he feel this way?

".....what's with you?"

".....hmmm.....how can I put this.....?"

The boy tilted his head. He held up the pinwheel he picked up and looked at Tougo from behind it.

"I feel like I know you."

There was no possible way he could say, *me too*, but the reality was that they both felt this déjà vu, and it confused Tougo even more. Was it just his imagination after all? The way he smiled with a troubled face was certainly like the person he knew. It was a match that out of all things, he didn't want to remember. Tougo cut off the conversation this

time.

“.....I don't get you at all.....if you don't need anything else from me, I'll be going.”

“Ah.....uum.....right, your name. What's your name?”

“It's Tsubaki.”

“.....Tsubaki. Huh, like the name of the flower.”

The boy smiled widely, and looked around. He probably meant the camellia flowers that were used for decoration. Now that mentioned it, it certainly was the name of the flower. Even though he couldn't understand why the boy was so happy about that, Tougo asked for his name for the time being.

“.....nice to meet you.”

The boy introduced himself as Yue, and bowed his head slightly as if he were shy. He held out his hand to shake, but Tougo refused it.

“.....even if you say that.....can I go now? Someone's waiting for me.”

“Ah, yeah, sorry.thanks.”

He didn't chase after him this time. At a somewhat quick pace, he left that place. He had a feeling he shouldn't linger there for very long. Since all of his confusion was all that boy's fault from earlier, Tougo muttered to himself quietly.

“.....what a weird guy.”

A strange nostalgic feeling like somehow wanting to talk to him more, like a restlessness, like wanting to touch something that he would by no means ever touch, settled somewhere deep in his heart.

“In the end, you couldn't find it then?”

“.....yeah. Sorry.”

Hina stuck out her bottom lip and lowered her head. She gripped his right hand tightly. As expected, Hina's disappointment hurt his chest.

“Hina-chan, sorry.you too, Tougo-kun.”

“No. There's nothing we can do, even oniichan looked for it.”

She probably liked it a lot. Her reasonable response betrayed her expression holding back tears. Before he could say something like, *I'll buy you one next year*, or *I'll look for it again tomorrow*, Hina who had been quiet until then lifted her face as if to cheer Tougo up.

“Hey, we had these made while we were waiting for you, oniichan.”

She had three sticks of candy shaped like foxes grasped in her small hand. She must have meant an artisan at a stall made them for her. They each had their own fox ears and tails. He could tell they were made to look like Hina, Yaiichi and Tougo.

“Well? They look just like us, right? Dad, oniichan, and Hina!”

Their grasp of the individual details was impressive. His little sister stuck out her chest triumphantly as she told him with a laugh that since she'd be upset if dad dropped them, she was going to hold onto them.

"I'll give you guys yours when we get home."

"Now then, where should we go now?"

Yaiichi asked Hina where she would like to go.

"Well, I want to go toward the square. The white foxes are dancing there."

"Okay, let's go buy Tougo-kun's food while we head that way."

Her small body took the lead as they started to walk. It was around the time that the festival reached full swing. He could hear loud laughter here and there. The voices coming from the booths were also boisterous.

"Foxes, huh."

He remembered his dream from the afternoon. The fox dance. He hadn't seen it since then. He wondered if that fox was dancing illuminated by the burning bright red flames this year too. He recalled the memory of his hand being held. Tougo rubbed the palms of his hands inside of the pockets of his coat. In order to forget about his heavy steps, he followed after Hina's back weaving between the crowd.

".....still, we just end up losing things here."

He suddenly let those words to himself slip out at this festival. Yaiichi next to him laughed quietly, perhaps knowing what Tougo meant.

"Seriously."

"....."

Tougo had no response to that.

"Hey, hey, the white fox dance was amazing!"

They had a front row spot to the grand festival's number one highlight, the fox dance. Hina was in high spirits on their way home. She danced the same choreography round and round.

"Like this. Then it was like this, so cool."

They had pushed through the crowd to be right at the front. It was the same place Tougo had seen it before with Akane. Of course they danced the same dance illuminated by the dazzling flames. Once the presentation was over, the foxes came down from the stage. They took off their masks and took pictures with the children and parents in the audience. Hina also applauded them enthusiastically. He searched for Akane amongst the crowd, but of course he didn't find her. Tougo felt disgusted in himself for his relief.

"Which fox did you like, Hina-chan?"

"Let's see, the fox in the middle was cool!"

Hina turned to Yaiichi and smiled. But, when she followed up with her oblivious and childish question of "which did you guys like, dad, oniichan?" they reflexively smiled wryly. There were still people who were fully enjoying the festival amongst the traffic of people. Even though he didn't see as many young children like Hina there still, the majority of people intended on enjoying the festival all night.

"Ah, hey, what's that?"

Hina suddenly stopped her feet, and pointed in front of her. There was a line of people holding small lamps in their

hands. Since they were away from the center of the festival, and there weren't as many of the decorative lights around either, the lamps in their hands stood out. If he strained his eyes, he could see that each of them were wearing old costumes, and there were people carrying banners, flying streamers, and pulling festival floats.

"Ooh, that's the grand festival procession."

Yaiichi answered.

"Where are they going.....?"

"The Sagano susuki field. They're all heading towards the shrine there."

Several tens of people formed a line and headed to the field outside the town starting from the Toochika residence, past the festival palanquin. The area called Sagano was a deserted place where few people went. He was told that it had once been used as a place to store scrap materials, but now that the susuki grass has overgrown there, no one uses that land anymore. The procession was heading this way via the road along the river. Their pace was slow, but now that they were closer, they could see them clearly.

"Ah! There's a tengu at the front."

At the front stood a Sarutahiko with the line continuing behind him.

"It's to guide the fox princess. They're telling her, come over this way."

"Why?"

"Because someone important to the princess is sleeping in that field."

According to Yaiichi's explanation, the shrine's goddess was somehow connected to that abandoned vacant area. This was the first time Tougo heard that.

"You know quite a lot about it, dad."

"Huh? Well, that's because for the time being, I'm the head of the Tsubaki family."

Even though the one telling him was unreliable, the Tsubaki family was one of the oldest families in this city. Tougo was aware that they were an old family, but didn't hold any special notoriety like the Toochika family that managed the festival. His father also knew that.

".....is it really that surprising?"

".....no."

He had said no for the moment, but normally, if he were to say something good about him, he was a gentle person, but if he were to say something not so good about him, he was surprised that his spacey dad was aware of his position as the head of the family.

When the procession approached Tougo and the others they stopped their feet, and yielded the road. He heard low voices singing. Every person forming the line was singing.

—*Akaya, akashiya, ayakashino.....*

Akane would sing it often. That's why Tougo also knew it. It seemed to be a lullaby passed down since long ago. His heart ached. He made an effort to not change his expression in order to hide that pain.

“Hey, Hina knows this song.”

“Did you learn it at the kindergarten?”

“No.....but I’ve known it for a long time.it was mom’s favorite song, right?”

Her small hand gripped his tighter. He squeezed that hand back.

“Akaya, akashiya, ayakashino.....”

“Hina.”

“Huh?”

“That person isn’t really your mom.”

Even though she was trying to make him feel better despite being told she didn’t have to, he had told her that coldly. Hina of course looked up at Tougo continuing to grasp his hand. Tougo, nor anybody, knew who Hina’s mother was.

“I like it too, that song.”

Yaiichi looked at Hina from beside her.

“So, it’s dad’s favorite song too?”

“That’s right.”

“Akaya, akashiya.....hey, dad. Could you teach me the rest of it this time? Hina only knows half of it.”

“Hm? Sure. Remember it, okay?”

The line of people with lamps in their hands eventually ended, and disappeared into the darkness. The low chanting of the lullaby resounded in Tougo’s ears.

His room grew cold deep into the night. Tougo’s room was located on the northeast side of the old one story house. His loft bed made of metal pipes creaked as he turned over in his sleep under his covers. The surface of his blanket gradually had traces of moisture from his suppressed breathing. He could hear Yaiichi and Hina’s sleeping breaths through his shut sliding door. They must have been tired, even Yaiichi who was normally a night owl took a bath early and went to bed. Ever since Tougo got into bed, he couldn’t sleep a wink as he thought about today’s events. He had heard the clock in the living room strike two, and it had already been half an hour since then. His eyes had adjusted to his dark room. He absentmindedly looked at the silhouettes around him. Akane had probably gone off somewhere. He had never thought about that before. When she went with that fox that was the first time Tougo had ever seen Akane that happy. Her girlish, gentle smile was full of joy. The night Akane disappeared was a festival day like today. He didn’t know what that fox’s face looked like, the fox that took her by the hand. Seven years had already gone by. He wondered what she was doing now. Was she dead, or was she living somewhere else now? A little while after Akane had disappeared, Yaiichi brought Hina home. His much younger sibling had somewhat saved Tougo from his emptiness. His mother’s absence had become the norm, even now he rarely thought about it. Tougo was no longer a child, and his family had changed. Even though he no longer hoped Akane would come back, why did he end up looking for her every festival? Every time his own actions made his frustrations worse, it brought back his doubts. The days Akane was a part of this family were long gone. He felt as though he couldn’t say whether he loved or hated her anymore. He wondered what he would tell her if he ever found her. Akane was always smiling inside of his memories. And then—that smile overlapped with that boy with the fox mask.

“.....what was with that guy?”

He met that strange boy in the crowd. Even if it was just a coincidental resemblance, he was way too similar. He felt a cold chill up his spine. Somehow, he couldn't settle his feeling of déjà vu. More than discomfort, it was an overwhelming, turbulent—indescribable feeling of restlessness. Since they just happened to meet by chance, he probably won't ever see him again. Tougo thought as he turned in his bed again.

—*Tsubaki. Huh, like the name of the flower.*

He had a gentle tone.


—*I'm Yue. Nice to meet you.*

The way he smiled, overlapped this time with the fox that took Akane away. Tougo felt nothing but confusion inside of that darkness. Holding onto his helpless anxiety all alone, he curled up.

“Tougo.”

He fell into the viscous darkness of sleep and had the dream he always had, hearing the voice of someone calling to him.

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

 frillyfujoshitranslations.tumblr.com/post/131942132307/akaya-akashiya-ayakashino-kagekui-machi-no

Chapter 2 The Blurred Twilight

The next day was quiet. Other than the students who had tired faces from cutting loose at the big festival being scolded by teachers, nothing had changed from the usual. Since he didn't sleep well, Tougo was unable to rid himself of the fatigue he felt from the grand festival. His body was heavy, as if it were made of clay.

It was his daily routine to pick up Hina from kindergarten once classes were dismissed, but since it was an extended-hours daycare and ended in the evening, if he didn't have anything planned, even walking by foot he would get there too early. Normally, he would kill time at the children's park near the kindergarten. During that hour of free time he could divert his heavy feelings.

After saying his goodbyes in a hurry, Tougo left the school and headed toward his intended destination at a quick pace. Even the wind was calm this afternoon as the setting sun warmed the asphalt. Yesterday's commotion seemed unbelievable. The steady sound of his shoes overlapped with the rhythm flowing from his headphones. He didn't want to think about anything right now.

After turning several corners he arrived at the park. It was dead silent and no one was there. There was a rusty globe jungle gym, monkey bars, and a slide.....

They each cast their own long pale purple shadows from the afternoon sunlight. He then took his usual spot on the swings. The chains let out a creak. After a while he gradually felt the presence of another person. Since the shadowy figure slowly swaying with the swing was on the ground away from his feet, Tougo figured it wasn't his own.

"Good evening."

After some time passed, he lifted his face when he noticed the silhouette in front of him. The boy Tougo met at the festival was looking down at him.

"Do you remember me?"

There was no way he could forget. Swallowing down his surprise, Tougo glared at him.

"How....."

"I was looking for you."

He tilted his head shyly. He had certainly told him his name was Yue.

".....for what?"

"I wanted to see you again.....do I need a reason?"

The way he tilt his head got on Tougo's nerves.

"If that's the case, you're good now, right?"

If you've done what you wanted to do, go home, Tougo demanded. The boy looked into Tougo's face with a wry smile.

".....you have a pretty harsh personality, don't you?"

"And *you're* way too suspicious."

He nonchalantly smiled, oblivious to Tougo's irritation.

".....I feel like we've met a long time ago. I guess you could say I feel nostalgic."

".....that answer doesn't help your case."

"Well, somehow anyway."

He knew that feeling. That's why when this boy said the same thing, his heart felt restless. Even if his mouth were to be split apart there was no way he could say he felt the same. It was a strange coincidence like déjà vu. *Why?* He could boldly declare they have definitely never met before. The nostalgia Tougo felt looking at Yue shouldn't have been directed at him. His face made him remember the fox from the festival. The man who took Akane away with him. That's why Tougo felt unnecessarily lost. With nowhere to go, his confusion turned into anger. Every time Yue showed up Tougo felt as though he was being dragged back into his past along with the presence of a person he didn't ever want to remember.

".....you're seriously suspicious."

"Huh?"

"Isn't that a cliché line for when someone is trying to trick you?that, *I feel like we've met before* line."

".....I didn't mean it that way though."

"What do you want now that we've met?"

"Hmmm, to talk.....or something? Well, anything is fine."

There was nothing more suspicious than that frankness of his.

"Even though that's the truth.....I can't? I guess not, huh....."

He gave up his attempts to pursue him with drooping shoulders. He knew that even if he kept talking he'd make no progress.

"If you're satisfied, can I leave?"

In order to end the conversation he would leave this place. The swing swung irregularly when it lost his weight on it.

"I thought you guys were similar, but you're not."

It was probably because of the mask Yue was wearing, or maybe it was because they met at the festival, or perhaps it was because he was looking for similarities that it sometimes seemed that way. He thought to himself, but eventually put an end to his continuously repetitive thoughts.

".....ah hey, could I come to see you again?"

Tougo had started to walk away, but Yue went up next to him. He curtly told him to do whatever he wanted. He didn't know what else to do. He couldn't see what face Yue was making in the backlight of the sunset. There was a rusty old bike parked at the entrance of the park. The sun had gone down quite a bit and the shadows surrounding the bushes all around them had become dark. The cold of winter started to change into the cold of night.

"....."

Feeling the presence of something, he stopped his feet. It wasn't Yue's, it was something much different. His whole body tensed. He looked over his shoulder without turning around. Tougo had been attacked by strange things ever since he was young. Therefore he was sensitive to things different from the norm.

".....wait a moment."

".....huh?"

As the noisy erratic footsteps came closer, Tougo turned around. At the same time someone started yelling at him.

"Are you really okay with that, Tougo Tsubaki!?"

Before Tougo even had time to be confused by the loud voice resounding toward him, it continued.

"Do you really think it's okay to let this suspicious guy talk you into whatever he wants?"

They boy clutching his collar as he spoke on and on was wearing the same Utsuwa High School uniform as Tougo. Since he was wearing a school issued mantle that had been discontinued several years ago, he couldn't tell who he was right away. He was wearing a scarf with a peculiar color and pattern like a watermelon, glasses, and a face mask. Since he pulled down his mask to yell, it looked like he could get spit on, so Tougo moved back. He wasn't sure if he thought he was scared or keeping a distance, but he spoke with a harsher tone.

"Remember your pride as a human!"

He seemed to be talking about something pretty important. Besides, if he was talking about someone being suspicious, the person himself was pretty suspicious.

"Just where did you pop out from?"

When he got a better look at him he noticed he had leaves and twigs clinging to his clothes and hair in some places. He must have been hiding in the park bushes. Since thinking too hard about it would defy all reason, he decided not to pursue it. This masked glasses guy was famous for being weird to begin with. He was probably going on about something a normal person wouldn't be able to understand.

"How cruel, weren't you the one who took me here, glasses-kun?"

"I don't recall giving you permission to deepen your friendship with him. I came here to protect Tsubaki after all."

From what Yue said next to him, the situation was starting to get even more complicated.

".....why? By the way, you know me?"

Actually, they were in different classes, and until now had never spoken to him. This masked glasses guy was infamous around this area, but Tougo on the other hand wasn't. It was surprising that he knew him. After a moment of silence he spoke.

"We're in the same grade."

He said as his eyes drifted towards the sky. Why were his cheeks turning red? Something pushed its way through the bushes with a rustle and a small creature appeared.

"Yue~. Don't leave me behind~. While you were talking to that guy, this guy kept muttering his complaints~. It was so creepy."

It was the small animal Yue had with him on the night of the festival. Its small body skillfully jumped onto Yue's

shoulder.

“!?”

“Huh, what’s wrong?”

“Did that thing talk just now……?”

He must have been seeing things. Tougo rubbed his eyes. There was definitely a creature there.

“Kurogitsune, it looks like that really *is* weird.”

Yue whispered quietly.

“Shut up. You got a problem with me talking?”

“That……small creature does……?”

“Is there anyone else here!? You got a problem with your eyes!?”

He could tell it was angry by the way its tail swung around and fur stood on end. It had a rather foul mouth despite its adorable looks.

“That’s fox mask’s familiar.”

The masked glasses guy explained triumphantly from the side.

“Familiar……?”

Tougo’s tilted head tilted to the other side when he heard those words he wasn’t accustomed to hearing and looked at the black dog-like creature. Unable to react with anything more than repeating his words, all his thoughts stopped.

“To explain frankly, he’s no ordinary small creature, so it’s not unusual for him to speak.”

“……it’s more unusual to me that you accept it as normal.”

However, it seemed like he had no choice but to accept it. Tougo surprisingly didn’t feel all that off about it. Animals might……be able to talk. Since it was actually happening before his eyes, it was difficult to deny. In the end, Tougo gave up trying to question it.

“……got it.”

“Don’t sigh and say you understand!”

He seemed to be unsatisfied by Tougo’s reaction, but Yue chided him and calmed his rage.

“So, what was he complaining about?”

Tougo returned to their conversation. He was going to have to let his fundamental doubts about why he was hiding in the bushes in the first place slide.

“He was jealous, *jealous*! He kept muttering stuff like *no fair, that was fast, what about me?*”

The quick-tongued small creature switched his location to Yue’s head and for some reason triumphantly stuck out his chest. Perhaps because he had exposed the unsavory details of his words, the masked glasses guy grabbed at the small creature with a red face.

"That is completely wrong! As expected, your wiles to deceive people are admirable."

Yue somewhat dodged his comment.

"Huh? What, you wanted to be included?"

"I only brought you here, but I won't allow you to do whatever you like."

He tried to stifle his agitation too late as he turned to Tougo. He must have been trying to apologize for something even though he didn't feel like questioning it. He seemed to be just as strange as the rumors suggested. As he took the small creature down from his head to his shoulder, Yue followed up for the time being.

"Ah, that's right. I asked masked glasses-kun to take me here since he knew where you were, Tsubaki."

"He was wandering around the school. I couldn't allow him to harm the other students. I came to the conclusion that it was dangerous to leave him be."

The masked glasses guy pushed up the bridge of his glasses and went back to his usual self. He was now having a hard time figuring out if these two got along well or not, or if they knew each other to begin with.

"I don't really follow, but in other words, you guys are working together."

"That's preposterous. Please don't lump me together with these guys."

With an indignant face the masked glasses guy pushed back his mantle and approached Tougo.

"Uwh. Yue, he called us these guys, instead of those guys."

"Neither is normal. Like, how that dog talks."

Tougo completely discarded the small creature who had immediately tried to make fun of him.

"What!? Don't just write me off! I'm not a dog! You got a problem with the great Kurogitsune talking, you bastard!?"

"Ah, don't worry about it too much, it's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal?"

"At the very least, for now."

He thought he was a dog, but if he looked closely, his large tail was certainly fluffy. He felt like he couldn't say he *didn't* look like a fox. If he were to point out how he was different from a normal fox, he could talk, and he had a white bandage wrapped around his head that covered his right eye. With that talisman-like thing affixed there, he was unable to see what was hidden underneath. The creature that seemed to be called Kurogitsune jumped off his shoulder and with a brief complaint curled up while he pouted. Yue smiled wryly as he pet around his neck. What a troublesome fox, Tougo thought. Weaving his way through the pause in the conversation, the masked glasses guy readily forced his way into it this time.

"You know me too, Tsubaki?"

"Huh? There's no one at our school who *doesn't* know about you."

"Is that.....so?"

He asked with his fist clenched as if he were making sure what he added on about him being famous was true. It was difficult to tell if he was happy or confused by that, but somehow he seemed deeply moved.

"If you're not working together, then what do you want from me? Tooichi....."

"AH—!!"

When he asked him what his business was with him, he suddenly interrupted him with a loud yell. *What's wrong*, Yue and Kurogitsune asked as they looked around with wide eyes in surprise. A mother and child passing by near the park looked toward the suspicious people then quickly left.

"Please call me by my first name."

"Huh? Why?"

"For various reasons. You guys too, my name is Akiyoshi. All right?"

He sighed when Akiyoshi triumphantly stated his name.

"What an increasingly dramatic guy."

"Hey, what about you, Tsubaki? What's your first name?"

"Tougo, right? Tougo Tsubaki."

"Wait, how did you know that, Kurogitsune?"

Yue asked thinking Kurogitsune's quick response was odd. *That masked glasses guy called him that earlier*, Kurogitsune answered evasively. Their pointless conversation that was like old people chatting over tea continued on for a bit when suddenly it fell silent. Tougo looked at his watch. It was a little early to go pick up Hina. However, he didn't want to stay here much longer.

"Can I go now? I need to pick up my little sister from kindergarten."

With just those last words, he tried to leave quickly. But, he wouldn't be allowed to in this case. With his eyes sparkling, Yue followed him.

"Huh, little sister? You have a little sister, Tsubaki?"

"You got a problem with that?"

"Nuh-uh. I see~ A little sister, huh~"

He crossed his arms behind his head and looked up at the sky for whatever reason. Being something only someone suspicious would say, Tougo glared at Yue through narrowed eyes.

"Aah, it hurts my feelings when you look at me like I'm suspicious.....ahaha."

He wouldn't look at Yue laughing to dodge the issue.

".....see you."

"Tsubaki."

"There's still something else?"

"Be careful around this fox mask. If anything happens, tell me."

"You're the one who brought him here in the first place....."

"See you later, Tsubaki."

Yue interrupted Tougo's point by waving his hand. Even Kurogitsune on his shoulder waved his tail. In the end, even Akiyoshi said his goodbyes in passing. Tougo watched those two and one animal leave the park then followed behind. This had been a rather hazy day.

".....what a weird guy."

He muttered to cover his confusion, but it really did feel like he was being deceived by a fox.

Midnight.

He was awake during the hours everyone was asleep. Perhaps he was feeling worked up about today's events. He restlessly slipped out of his loft bed and headed to the kitchen. The cold air inside of the house was stagnant and extremely heavy. The clock on the wall in the living room slowly emphasized the time passing. He twisted the faucet and filled his glass almost to the point of overflowing with the water that came out, and drank it all down at once. The cold made his head hurt. The parts that he couldn't drink down leaked out from the corners of his mouth and trickled down his chin. It soaked into the top of his pajamas and disappeared.

"I"

With a loud rumble Tougo was assaulted by a swaying that tossed him around. Along with the old building, everything inside the house creaked. Something seemed to collapse in the adjoining room, his father's work space. He wasn't sure if it was stacks of documents or the books he used for reference. Shortly after, he sensed his father waking up.

"That was a long one, wasn't it? Are you all right, Tougo-kun?"

"Yeah, everything's fine here. It looks like your reference books fell over though, dad."

Yaiichi also looked tired. He rubbed his eyes in a daze as he walked down the hallway.

"What about Hina?"

"Sleeping."

He whispered as he laughed quietly. After checking that each of them were okay, Tougo returned to his room. His feelings that should have quieted down by the cold water once again stirred up.

The next day.

The same as yesterday, Tougo welcomed the end of class feeling somewhat inattentive. Today was his turn on the rotational classroom cleaning day. He watched the other students going home outside from the window as he waited. The stove had been shut off so the classroom started to gradually lose the warmth of the day.

".....so you know, this time my dream career research turned into my dream school."

Takahashi who at some point was beside him started talking about careers. It was an unavoidable subject for a second year high school student during winter. Bringing up the subject he asked, what about you, and made Tougo think about it. He hoped to go on to a University, but he definitely made it this far without displaying any sort of strong determination. He made sure to study, and his grades weren't bad. He could probably get a referral, but when he thought about Yaiichi who was normally working, he came to decision at that moment, even though it was hard for him to say.

"It would probably be difficult for me."

“Even though you like to study?”

“.....I don't really *like* to.”

Takahashi made a sound of disbelief at his reply.

“I just wanted to get advice from someone in the know.”

He said with a tone that sounded like he was giving up already as he looked up at the ceiling. With finals and entrance exams for new students overlapping, everyone was forced to become conscious of their futures around this time. It seemed to be a subject weighing on everyone's mind.

“In that case, shouldn't you ask Suzuki?”

“Suzuki!?”

Takahashi jumped in shock when he casually mentioned the name of their classmate.

“.....well, he made sure to take notes. If you took notes for the exam like you should have your grades wouldn't be what they are.”

“Yeah, but Suzuki.....”

Takahashi looked up then put his right hand to his forehead.

“.....you're really okay if I turn out like that guy?”

“Well, it's fine, isn't it?”

He said, but when Tougo thought about it, it would be troubling if there were two Suzukis. His classmate Suzuki was infamous in parts of the school. His disposition was extremely hardworking. His personality was amicable and gentle. He was a little short for a second year high school boy, and had a baby face, but you could say that added to the charm of his looks.

“Look, speak of the devil.”

Right behind him stood the actual Suzuki.

“.....Tsubaki, um.”

“Huh, me?”

“Yes, Tsubaki. Um, you went to the nurse's office during third period, right? I took notes, so y-you can use them if you like!”

With the force of handing someone a love letter he held out math notes.

“....., today math was...”

They cancelled class because the teacher caught a cold, Takahashi interjected, but was interrupted.

“I had lots of time to think about the most effective way to provide math notes. Math is full of the necessary components for the development of notes.”

“Development of notes.....?”

He wasn't familiar with those words. At the very least, that wasn't the theme of math class. However, when Tougo repeated what he said, Suzuki nodded earnestly.

"That's right! The original Utsuwa High School notebooks they sell at the school store that I bought during an emergency were easy to use, and even though they're pretty high quality for notes I think there's still room for improvement. I always use lined paper, and even though it's debatable that it makes it prettier, that argument is still on the table in this case. Math has a lot of equations, fractions, shapes, and situations that depart from the basic scope of notebooks. Especially the scope for the upcoming exam....."

"This is about math notes?"

Takahashi interrupted, but was powerless against Suzuki who was speaking so fervently. His eyes instantly started to sparkle, and turned toward Takahashi this time. The eyebrows on his baby face knit as he held up his index finger with a sincere face. He started his eloquent speech.

"Good question, Takahashi. Right, this is a serious issue. Does math exist for the sake of notes, or do notes exist for the sake of math.....In any case, they're both essential for each other, but hypothetically, if they weren't, one should exist to support the other. What do you think, Tsubaki?"

"Well, since I've got what's covered on the math exam down, I'm fine. This guy doesn't make sure to take any notes, so I think you should show yours to Takahashi."

"Takahashi, huh....."

"Hmmm."

He replied with his head down. He clearly treated the two of them differently. Takahashi snorted annoyed.

"You got a problem with me?"

"If you would like to discuss the possibility of notes with me after class, I'd gladly welcome it."

"The possibility of notes....."

He could kind of understand how Takahashi felt when he averted his gaze with a bad feeling.

"Actually, I wanted to start a Note Research Club, but according to the student council you need to have at least five interested members."

"I'm not going to ask for any specific details because it sounds scary, but why are you trying to make a club the winter of your second year?"

Suzuki now looked at his unsuspecting opponent. His cheeks flushed and his eyes sparkled. He was like a boy with a dream.

"That's because it's been my dream since I entered high school. I won't give up. I want to talk about beautiful notes with everyone, I want to predict the progress of notes, I want to research the history of notes. It'd definitely be fun."

".....dream, huh."

"Well, everyone has their own....."

Suzuki noticed Tougo trying to sneak away from this place and turned to him. He handed him his notes with a smile.

".....anyway, Tsubaki. These are my notes, have a look at them if you like."

“Huh, right.”

Just as he was about to accept the notes held out to him, he noticed some commotion coming from the hall. He could vaguely hear apparent conversations about an intruder coming in.

“Hey, Tsubaki!”

A classmate stuck his face in the doorway from the hallway and called to him.

“A friend(?) of yours is here~”

“Huh? Friend?”

He asked back.

“He’s wearing a fox mask. He asked what classroom you were in.”

“!”

Getting a bad feeling from those words Tougo frantically ran out into the hallway.

“Tsubaki, what’s wrong?”

Takahashi asked from behind him surprised. Without time to reply, he exited the hallway.

“Look, that guy.”

It was certainly a face he knew.

“.....him.....”

“What a weird guy. Is he from another school?”

“.....no.”

Tougo didn’t know anything about his identity. They didn’t even have the sort of relationship to even be called acquaintances. When he tried to say that, the boy noticed him and ran up to him. He was wearing the same outfit today as well, and Kurogitsune was riding on his shoulder.

“Tsubaki!”

His geta clacked loudly on the old wood floors. The way he called his name probably looked as if they had a close relationship to the people around them. Tougo gave up trying to rationalize it.

“Why are you here.....”

“Hmmm, I was wondering what sort of place school was.”

“Huh?what does that mean.....?”

From his appearance he was probably around the age of a high school student. There was no way he didn’t know what kind of place a school was. He looked around his surroundings as if he were on a sight-seeing trip. He couldn’t think of anything other than he must have had circumstances in which he couldn’t attend high school. Gradually people started to crowd around them. Female students stopped in their tracks when their eyes caught sight of the black creature riding on top of his shoulder. When they called him cute in their nasally high pitched voices, the small creature puffed out his chest and his tail swayed even more than usual.

"Huh!? Who are they calling cute, I don't need stupid compliments like that! Of course I'm cute."

The girls seemed to find his speaking human words irresistible as well. They weren't all that freaked out by it and continued to fawn over him.

"Ah, a teacher is coming."

Someone in the crowd said. Immediately the commotion settled down. He could certainly see the figure of a teacher interrupting his line of vision across from him.

"Hey, Yue, a teacher is coming, that's gunna be a pain. We found him, so let's hurry up and go."

"That's true. Well, let's go."

He grabbed his hand as if it were natural and Tougo frantically tried to shake him off. However, that hand unexpectedly would not let go of him. Tougo who was now being dragged along raised his voice in protest.

"Hey, let go!"

"No way. Because you won't come with me if I let go, right?"

Yue who stopped temporarily turned to look toward Tougo as he spoke sincerely.

"If you don't come with me, I won't know how to get out. I feel much more at ease like this than by myself."

What he said didn't seem to make sense since he came in and looked for Tougo all on his own. When he pointed that out with a sigh, his opponent was already standing straight with a broad smile on his face.

"That's true. But, it's so big in here, and all the rooms look the same, so I got lost. I finally saw someone I knew and was relieved."

".....are you trying to mess with me.....?"

"Aah, don't worry! This guy isn't capable of that sort of thing."

Tougo who felt nothing but exhaustion received the last blow from the small creature without hesitation. He really was rather serious.

"Right. So.....won't you come with me outside?"

"Damn it....."

During their exchange a teacher was making his way toward them. If they were caught it would be a pain, so Tougo was pressed to make a decision on this obvious situation. Yue was holding his hand, it was his turn for cleaning duty, and he even left his bag in the classroom. When he looked inside the classroom Takahashi was smiling wryly from within the crowd. Guessing he should set aside the reasons for his situation, he told him he owed him a bentou for taking over his cleaning duties and brought him his bag.

"Sorry."

"Well, I don't really get it, but it seems interesting. Tell me about it tomorrow."

"I don't even know what's going on."

Tougo grabbed his things as they spoke briefly, he then left the classroom as if he were being taken away. He saw Suzuki frozen in place holding his notes to his chest next to the waving Takahashi.

“Can we get out through here?”

“Yeah. By the way, don’t come in here with your shoes.”

The second year classrooms were lined up on the second floor. Tougo’s class was at the corner. If they went down the stairs in front of this class and turned at the dance room, the entrance way would be right in front of them. In the end, Tougo led them towards the entrance. The deep gray steel rack set up was about half full of student shoes lined up on it. He wondered if the other half had gone home or to their club activities. He must have come in through the staff entrance since Yue was looking closely at all the shoe cubbies as if it was the first time he had seen them.

“Heeeh, you change your shoes here? How interesting. I’ve seen it on TV before though.”

“That outfit of yours is way more interesting.....so, what did you come here for?”

He asked him directly. He didn’t expect anything from him since their brief meeting, but he had a right to know why he involved him in all that commotion earlier.

“I came to see you, Tsubaki.”

He was direct.

“Again?”

“Yeah.”

“Alone?”

“Yep.”

“Hey! Don’t you guys ignore me!”

Neglecting the dumbfounded Tougo, Kurogitsune started to bark. Wasn’t his shouting next to Yue’s ears noisy? In his usual nonchalant way, Yue corrected his statement.

“Ah, right, right, alone with one animal.”

“You always bring him along, huh, that dog-like thing.”

“I told you I’m not a dog! I’m the great Kurogitsune!”

“I don’t care either way.”

His tail seemed to move when he got worked up. When Tougo went down to the tiled floor, he changed his shoes on the slatted wood floor and returned his indoor shoes to their cubby. Yue also came down. The heels of his geta clacked loudly against the gray tiles.

“So?”

“.....so? What?”

His calm behavior was as if he couldn’t grasp what Tougo meant, and it made him even more annoyed.

“If you’re satisfied, go.”

“About that, could I go with you?”

Tougo, who believed he would be released from him if he came with Yue this far hesitated, wondering what to do about his serious and heavy proposal, but unfortunately could not find a way to escape. He took a deep breath in an effort to calm down.

“.....where?”

“With you, Tsubaki.”

“Why?”

“Aaah! I guess you won’t just say okay without a reason, huh. Hey, Yue, tell him why already.”

Kurogitsune smacked his forehead with his front paws to urge Yue on as if he were starting to get on his nerves.

“Hurry up and answer so we can go. If you keep going at this pace the sun will start to set soon.”

Yue’s eyes wandered up at the sky deep in thought when he was spoken to. The last cord of Tougo’s patience snapped without waiting for Yue’s reply.

“.....speaking of which, seriously, what’s been your problem since the day before yesterday? What the hell do you want with me?”

His strong tone seemed to briefly surprise Yue. His sleepy eyes grew wide, then—

“I’m interested in you.”

He smiled in his usual way again.

“Even I’m not sure why though.”

His reasoning was extremely vague words.

“Even though I don’t know why, I have this intense feeling of wanting to be by your side.”

His hesitant reply composed of simple vocabulary shook Tougo. As he said his reason, even though it didn’t offer a single justification, it appealed strongly to him.

“.....”

Tougo briefly lowered his gaze then started to walk away without a word. At some point his silhouette became sparse.

“.....ah, wait, Tsubaki.....”

Yue frantically chased after him, but he didn’t stop walking. He felt like he *shouldn’t* stop. He didn’t want to let his guard down around that person’s presence. The one issuing these warnings was himself from his childhood.

“.....Tsubaki?”

Be careful, be careful. If you aren’t careful, you’ll—lose something again.

“.....if you didn’t look like that, I would have called the police.”

The small creature and Yue faced each other for a moment then once again chased after Tougo. They probably didn’t understand what he meant. Even so, he didn’t care. He ignored Yue chasing after him and continued to walk. He exited the entrance way. The path to the school gates was paved with asphalt and was a little bit of a distance

away. As he looked to the left of the bronze Ninomiya Kinjiro statue erected in the bushes, he headed towards the iron door at the main gate. Ahead the students who he had thought had gone home were stopped in front of the gate. When he got closer he knew something was different and was causing a commotion. For some reason, there seemed to be a single student blocking the exit. There was a teacher next to him trying to persuade him to move away from there. As far as he could tell, it wasn't very effective.

"Aah~ you, no one can go home, move."

"....."

"If you stay quiet I won't be able to understand, don't you have anything to say for yourself!?"

He had probably been there for a while, the teacher looked completely exhausted.

"What an annoying day this turned out to be....."

He felt a sharp gaze pierce him. Tougo sighed. When he looked closer the one completely ignoring the teacher was Akiyoshi who he met at the park yesterday. He was wearing glasses and a mask today too as he held a tissue box under his arm. The way he was never without his mask or tissues made it seem like he had a severe case of hay fever. With one leg propped up on the iron bars of the school gate, and his back against the concrete pillar, he blocked the flow of people. He turned toward him in that pose.

"He's like a huge log damming up a river....."

"I won't let you escape....."

That eccentric spoke with a ridiculously dramatic tone of voice.

"I *want* to escape."

He muttered reflexively.

"Impossible."

Kurogitsune replied matter of fact. People who couldn't read the thoughts of others were creepy.

".....you know."

With Yue behind him, Tougo was surrounded and couldn't move.

"Even though I really don't want to if possible....."

He had a determined expression as if his mind was already made up which betrayed his restrained words.

"Huh?"

"It's just that, even if I said I was going with Tsubaki alone no matter what, that guy over there isn't going to let me by either."

The small creature next to him nodded.

".....in other words."

"In other words, let's include the stalker."

"What is this, coercion.....?"

"Wouldn't we be more at ease having him go with us than being obviously stalked?"

It was a terrible suggestion.

".....damn it....."

His will to escape was nowhere to be found even if he bothered to look.

"Now then, let's depart~"

Yue raised his hand high like a tour conductor as he took the lead.

"Yes, let's."

Even though he should have only been accepting Yue's bargaining terms, Akiyoshi, taking advantage of his confusion also joined in.

"So? You said go, but where?"

"Uuh.....who knows.....?"

"I don't know either."

".....you said that *full* of confidence, huh."

The conversation was exhausting him thoroughly. In any case, there was still a crowd of people left in front of the main gate. He could feel the curious gazes of students pierce him. He wanted to hurry up and get away from here. He felt that from the bottom of his heart. When he thought about what people would say to him tomorrow he felt heavy. His classmates will probably want to know all the details.

"That's no good, Tsubaki. They say your happiness escapes whenever you let out a sigh."

He was given pointless advice from one of the culprits of his sigh.

"I want to go wherever Tsubaki is going."

"I also have no objections to that."

Tougo objected quite a bit to that as he was attacked from both sides.

".....you guys really intend on following me? Even though I'm just going to pick up my little sister?"

He wanted to fend these guys off if possible, but the two of them had serious faces. Realizing he couldn't escape, Tougo had confessed his destination.

"Yeah. I want to see Tsubaki's little sister. I bet she's cute~"

He didn't know what he was basing that on, but Yue smiled softly. Instead of agreeing, Akiyoshi looked at his watch.

"It seems to be a little early to be picking her up though."

".....hey, you."

Even Tougo who was normally not surprised by much anymore was left speechless. The person himself seemed to lack self-awareness as he tilted his head puzzled. That gesture with his mask and glasses was expectedly creepy.

"What's wrong? Is there something on my face?"


“No.....”

He felt awkward having to explain every little thing.

“You really are a stalker through and through, aren’t you?”

Kurogitsune exposed what they were all thinking to themselves.

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

 frillyfujoshitranslations.tumblr.com/post/135286472472/akaya-akashiya-ayakashino-kagekui-machi-no

Chapter 3 Wavering Vestiges

“Heeeh, it’s here~?”

Yue looked at the building in a carefree manner. The wooden one story kindergarten building was rusted in some places, but recently had been decorated with unusual and detailed designs so it didn’t feel so old. Rather than white, the walls were tinged with a pale gray color, giving it an impression of softness to anyone who looked at them. On the wall was a drawing of a children’s anime character’s smiling face someone seemed to have tried their best to draw with their slogan on a poster affixed to it.

“Sagano Kindergarten.....huh. How nostalgic.”

Akiyoshi narrowed his eyes.

“Aah, come to think of it, you also attended this kindergarten, right?”

“Huh!? Really!?”

“Why are *you* surprised, fox mask!?”

“Enough, you two.”

This sort of exchange between the two of them had become the norm in a short time. Tougo watched them from the corner of his eye with an annoyed look as he headed towards the kindergarten entrance. They passed children going home, hand in hand with their guardians. A female teacher saw them off as she waved when Tougo spoke to her.

“Ah, Tougo-kun. Thank you for coming as always~. You brought friends with you today?”

“Huh, ooh.....something like that. Sorry for all the commotion.”

“Wait a moment~”

He watched the teacher go to call his little sister then glared at the other two as they continued their argument from earlier in the entrance way to shut them up.

“Oh, Tougo-kun, and.....you are...”

An elderly man appeared, replacing the teacher. He was wearing an orange apron that didn’t suit his age. He was the kindergarten’s principal. He looked at Akiyoshi’s face, thought for a moment then laughed.

“Right, right, Akiyoshi-kun. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Huh, he remembered you? Isn’t that great, Akiyoshi?”

“Haha, I remember all the children who attend my kindergarten.”

“Hey, this guy is all choked up. Isn’t this a good thing? Hey!”

“Kh.....sensei.....”

Kurogitsune pet Akiyoshi with his front paws as the principal watched with a smile.

“That teacher you were so attached to, Ms. Saori, recently got married though.”

“Kh.....sensei.....”

“Aaah.....this time you’re shedding tears for a different reason. Hey, cheer up.”

“I’m not crying! Obviously!”

“Akiyoshi sure can take a beating.....ah.”

Yue looked behind Tougo’s shoulder down the kindergarten hallway. The figure of a young girl partially running appeared in the entrance way.

“Oniichan, sorry for the wait! I forgot my gym clothes in the room so I had to go grab them!”

Hina put on her shoes and ran up to the irritated Tougo. She held his hand and looked up at the other two.

“Who are these people? Oniichan’s friends?”

“Yeah. I guess we’re something like that. Are you Hina-chan?”

Yue interjected before Tougo could deny it.

“That’s right. What’s your name, oniichan?”

“I’m Yue. This here is Kurogitsune.”

Yue simply gave his name then introduced the fox on his shoulder.

“.....a dog?”

“A fox!!”

After a reply of agreement, Hina spotted Akiyoshi. Hina’s small fingertips squeezed tighter around his hand. Tougo could sense Hina’s uneasiness. It was probably because he had never taken anyone here with him before. However, she didn’t look nervous at all.

“And that masked glasses guy?”

“Aah, that’s Akiyoshi.”

It seemed like it took some time to get used to seeing his mask with his glasses and unusual mantle with his outfit. Pondering over the name Yue told her, Hina tilted her head.

“Akiyoshi-kun is Hina-chan’s senpai.”

The principal offered his assistance from beside her. Though, it seemed to confuse her even more. Her tilted head leaned to the opposite side.

“Senpai.....?”

“He was a graduate from here.”

“Even Akiyoshi had this sort of childhood, huh.....”

Akiyoshi who had been quiet until then snapped back at Yue’s honest mutterings.

“Stop with that distant look of yours.”

“You guys..... Hey, Hina, let’s go now.”

“Kaaay!”

“Goodbye.”

After a slight nod to the principal Tougo heard him call out for him to wait a moment from behind his back.

“Ah, Tougo-kun. Next month is our graduation ceremony, would you be able to help out this year as well?”

“Yes. I’ll tell my dad too.”

“You’re always a big help. Being the only man here to help out isn’t enough.”

“It’s nothing, my dad seems to look forward to it too.”

After nodding in agreement with a gentle expression, the principal turned to the other two.

“If it’s all right with you two, why don’t you help out as well?”

“Huh?”

“If you’re okay with my help.....”

Akiyoshi replied quietly, but his clenched fists were trembling. Tougo felt as though he saw an extraordinary aura of motivation rise up from behind him.

“Huuuh, then I want to go too.”

“You’re an outsider.”

“I welcome any friends of Tougo-kun. The more helping hands we have the better.”

They weren’t very close, nor was he someone whose background he was familiar with enough to even trust. Unable to properly explain his concerns, he cut off the conversation. Everyone except Tougo smiled widely at the principal’s few words.

“.....ufufu.”

In a dark room with the lights turned off, the voice of a young girl echoed faintly. That small sound inside of the room was awfully clear as if it could drown out the voices of the people coming and going, and the sounds of the cars outside. Expressing both the innocence of a child and the cunning of a young girl, her laughing voice was distorted. At the very least, if someone saw her, they wouldn’t think she suited a place like a kindergarten. The sun was setting outside of the window, so the state of the room was mostly indistinguishable. The floor by the window seemed to have traces of a faint light shining in from the streetlamp. If it was during the daytime, the overlapping drawings by the kindergartners decorating the wall and each of the bags lined up on the lockers would be visible.

“Ufufufufu..... Hey, I’ve been waiting for so long.”

Leaning her body against the lockers as she faced the window looking outside, the young girl sensed the presence of someone behind her and opened her mouth. There was the figure of an elderly man at the entrance of the classroom.

“Sensei.”

The young girl looked back.

“I’ve been waiting.”

The kindergarten principal scratched his slightly balding head as he pondered about this kindergartner he couldn’t recognize. Being tall for his age along with his white hair and mustache, he looked as though he was from a foreign country. The principal pushed up his round framed glasses and once again strained his eyes to look into the room. The vivid yellow of the school issued smock the young girl was wearing stood out once his eyes adjusted to the dark. As opposed to her straight black as night hair that flowed down her back.

“I’ve been waiting this whole time. For so long. Why doesn’t everyone just go home?”

“Coming out like this as soon as it got dark, I thought you were a ghost.”

“Is that what I look like to you?”

The principal shook his head. Just from her appearance, she looked like a normal child.

“Can I turn on the light?”

The young girl still didn’t turn around.

“Why?”

“So I can see your face. If you’re one of my students who’s lost, I’d like to get you home.”

“Ufufu, sensei is so kind.”

The principal took one step. His shoes made a dull thud sound inside of the room. The girl turned around.

“That’s not necessary.”

With a loud sound, he felt as though the darkness of the room became even darker. Suddenly something like a thick tar seemed to fill the room. A sudden overwhelming silence tightened around his head as if he was being dragged down into the depths of the ocean. The principal may not have seen the sparkle in the young girl’s beast-like eyes. Inside of the enveloping darkness, he was...*eaten*. His glasses fell with a clacking sound as the girl wiped her mouth satisfied.

“Sensei, thanks for the feast. Your mustache, your eyes, your hands, your head.....were all so yummy.”

The young girl’s form eventually disappeared, and the sound of people coming and going returned. The footsteps of the people hurrying home echoed noisily.

The fluorescent lamp in his room was making a faint flickering sound. *I need to buy a new lamp bulb on the way home tomorrow*, he thought as he faced his writing desk. Fortunately, the desk lamp near his hand was lighting up just fine, so it didn’t interfere with today’s homework. Placed in Tougo’s room on a tatami floor was a pipe loft bed. A writing desk was placed beneath it. It was quite typical of a child’s room. This layout hadn’t changed much ever since he started sleeping alone. The biggest change was a poster of a western band he put up when he started to hold an interest in music, but aside from that nothing more than the reference books and dictionaries that he accumulated from each grade level lined up on his shelves.

After accompanying Hina home, he made dinner. After a little break, he finished his homework and independent

studies. This was his daily routine. He made enough food for his dad, but since Yaiichi's return home was sporadic at times there weren't many days they all ate together around the same table. Even so, if he was able to finish work comparatively early all three of them would be able to eat dinner as a family after such a long time.

"Oniichan, the bath is ready~"

At the same time he heard the muffled sound of a knock on his sliding door, Hina came into his room. He took his eyes away from his notebook.

"It's fine, you go on in first with dad."

"Whaaa, with dad.....?"

Hina said with an extremely dissatisfied voice as she knit her brows exaggeratedly. That expression didn't suit her still childish face.

"Is Hina-sama planning on pouting forever? Cheer up already."

"But, dad lost Hina's pinwheel!"

She seemed to be still holding her grudge from two days ago. He was chiding his sulking little sister, but she was normally a reasonable little girl, therefore it was unusual for her to pout this long.

"Forgive him already. Dad getting all depressed will be a pain."

"Haa. I've thought this for a while now, but Yacchi really is a space case, isn't he?"

She spoke like a competent adult as her shoulders fell in disappointment, but then she laughed. She probably wasn't really angry anymore.

"It's always the same with that guy, whether it's his habit of losing things or his habit of taking things in, so give up already."

".....oniichan is fine with giving up, huh~"

"It's my principle to not get attached to unimportant things."

"Hina can't give up."

Puffing out her round cheeks in a huff, she spotted the pinwheel decorating the shelf on the side of his desk. She blew the air out from her puffed out cheeks making the pinwheel spin round and round. Tougo knew Hina had always wanted that pinwheel. It might have been the thing she wanted most in life, so when she was able to get one on the day of the festival then losing it that same day, he could understand her disappointment. Even more so if he were a young child like her.

"Here, I'll give you mine. So, forgive him."

He grabbed the pinwheel and handed it to her. Hina looked at it for a while, but pushed it back at Tougo.

"I don't want it."

"Hina wanted to match oniichan. Didn't someone give oniichan that one a long time ago?"

Without noticing Tougo was at a loss for words, Hina continued.

"I was told someone important bought it for you, that you treasured it."

"Did dad tell you that?"

He felt his heart beating fast. It was something he had already tried to forget.

".....yeah. Hey, what's wrong?"

"That's not true."

It was just something he couldn't throw away. He didn't think his father saw it that way. He could probably see through Tougo's troubles.

"You're not going to tell me that person wasn't really important to you, are you?"

"Right?"

Hina emphasized as she picked up the pinwheel placed on the desk and made Tougo hold it in his hand.

"Hina also treasured that pinwheel. But, even though oniichan went to go look for it, you couldn't find it, right?"

"Ah, yeah."

"Still, dad shouldn't lose even Hina's things."

".....yeah."

"Hina is going to take a bath. Don't stay up too late either, oniichan."

I'll overlook it this time, she said as she left the room. Tougo wasn't sure how to reply. The moment before she closed his sliding door, she spoke.

".....I hope you find what you're looking for, oniichan."

Her words were calm, but they left a pain in his chest like a gash. Tougo muttered to himself under the fluorescent lamp that had started to flicker.

"I'm not even looking, so.....why?"

The man who gave the young Tougo the pinwheel, and Yue who looked so much like him. These vestiges he should have forgotten, that he *wanted* to forget, that appeared before Tougo did nothing but frustrate him even now.

When he opened the side entrance at the side of the closed gate, the wooden door creaked. The sun was setting, so not that many people were passing by at this hour. The sound that was louder than he thought it would be reached Akiyoshi's ears. He opened the entranceway as to not make a sound, and with stealthy footsteps walked down the hallway to his room. Akiyoshi was starting to think that he wasn't grateful at all for his old, spacious house with its noisy wooden floors and long hallways. Their live-in maid was always able to walk without raising the sound of her footsteps, but Akiyoshi wasn't able to do the same. He had been secretly researching what techniques were required but had yet to be successful. He passed by his father's study then went up the expectedly creaky stairs. He finally made it to the entrance of his room.

"Phew."

The moment he let out a sigh of relief, he felt a presence behind him.

"You're late."

“!”

That was certainly his father’s voice. It was the calm low voice he used when he was in a bad mood. Akiyoshi’s shoulders dropped in disappointment. There was never a time he had not been caught by him for breaking curfew.

“I don’t appreciate you goofing around until this hour.”

When he turned around his father, Akitoshi, was glaring at him with an imposing stance, arms crossed, just as he expected.

“Didn’t I tell you to come home at sunset?”

“.....it was unintentional today.”

Akiyoshi didn’t necessarily break curfew because he wanted to, but sunset came early during winter no matter what, which resulted in him being unable to keep curfew quite often.

“.....you did the same the night before, going out alone even though I told you not to.....”

“I can go wherever and whenever I want. I’m not a child anymore.”

“An adult wouldn’t say such things. How many times do you think I’ve told you it’s dangerous, especially on festival days.”

“But, I don’t believe being locked up all the time because you’re afraid of every little danger is a good thing.”

“Akiyoshi.”

Bitterness flashed across Akitoshi’s brow. He only used his stifled voice when he was truly angry. He had told him over and over again ever since he was little to be careful of being taken away during the festival days. He was getting sick of hearing it. Akiyoshi had always done what he said. His stern father managed the annual grand festival, so when he was young, even Akiyoshi was extremely proud of him. His stern-faced father, with his large palms, would pat his young head full of thoughts of becoming like father when he grew up. It made him happy. However, once he got older he started to turn his skeptical gaze toward his father’s standing. The reason was the disappearance of his playmate. When Akiyoshi came crying to him about his friend disappearing, Akitoshi faced him with a sullen face.

Since no one could remember that child, everyone treated Akiyoshi as a clueless, eccentric child. Akiyoshi continued to look for that child in the town even to this day. Now he feared that his classmate, Tougo Tsubaki, would disappear in the same way. That’s why he got close to him. He knew perfectly well that his father would of course disapprove. Quitting, and being a bystander like his father, meant the same thing to Akiyoshi, therefore he chose his own path of action. Things other than humans existed in this town. Only members of the Toochika family knew that sometimes they appeared to take people away and eat them.

“Anyway, I can’t listen to every little thing you say, dad.”

“Akiyoshi.”

Since he knew this was going to be an endless argument no matter how long they talked, Akiyoshi cut off it off as he put a hand to his door.

“Just don’t go near that place. Don’t forget that. All right?”

He had been told that repeatedly, but naturally Akiyoshi had been to that place. The Sagano susuki field, the final destination of the festival procession, was originally an area no one would ever go. Even when Akiyoshi went, he couldn’t find anything worth his father’s warnings over there. All he could hear was the sound of dry grass fluttering in the wind. Akiyoshi thought it was nothing more than a place with abandoned heavy machinery, rusting away, not out

of the ordinary in any way.

“.....is there something out there?”

“.....you don't need to know yet.”

Not answering Akiyoshi's question, his father turned around and returned down the hall.

“.....”

Akiyoshi clenched his fists, his stomach boiling over with nothing but resentment. His father's way of hiding various things from him made it difficult for Akiyoshi to forgive him.

“Young master.”

The one who called out to the stock still Akiyoshi was their maid.

“Yamori-san.”

“Your father said this as well, but I'm also worried about you, young master. Please try to understand that.”

“But.....”

Even Akiyoshi knew that much. Unable to comprehend any more than that, he tried to argue back. Without even listening to Akiyoshi's argument, she spoke to Akitoshi who had stopped a little away from them.

“You too, sir. Don't make such a scary face.”

“.....this is my normal face.”

“You used to have such a sweet face a long time ago. At some point it got this stern..... Now, now, madam is waiting.”

Unable to argue with her, they were ushered to the dining room.

“Today is young master's favorite melon fried eel. So for at least dinner time, get along, you two.”

With her usual silent footsteps, the maid left before them. The two left behind looked at each other then headed into the dining room.

“I won't give up.”

His father said nothing more in return.

There were shadows in the sky, since long ago. Utsuwa hasn't known a refreshingly bright morning or the clear blue sky of noon for a long time. The shadows continuing to cover the town existed even now. Due to that, the darkness of the night was deep, and dusk was somber. The shadows were bound there in order to make Utsuwa town a hunting ground. It existed as a tank to offer a feast to things that weren't human. There were few people who were aware of this.

“.....the shadows are wavering.”

Illuminated by candlelight, a young girl looked into the emptiness. She was in the inner parlor of the main sanctuary, situated in the middle of the shrine. With her animal ears and eight tails, she was clearly not human.

"It's as if they're awakening from their sleep."

She was speaking to herself, but the man standing next to her was also listening.

"Well, how does it look? Satou."

The young girl asked. The man called Satou nodded with furrowed brows. He wore hakama, and had a large shawl over his shoulders. His appearance was that of a tall, elderly man.

"There is nothing unusual about the town at the moment. There is no change in the wedge for the shadows."

"I see."

The young girl thought for a moment then changed the subject.

"How is Yue?"

"He may be worn out. He seems to still have a fever, but Kurogitsune is watching over him."

Kurogitsune had noticed Yue didn't look so good when they came back from the town. Since then he has been sleeping as if he fell unconscious. The mansion was in a clamor because of that. For now they were letting him sleep in his room as they thought over what may be the cause.

"He's weaker than he was originally. It's natural to worry."

"He's still young. His life is such a small one. Somehow, we will just have to wait."

"Good grief. You were perfectly aware of that and still let him go outside, Mikoto-sama."

Satou interrupted her worried tone of voice. The one who ordered Yue to go down to the town in the first place was her after all.

"It couldn't be helped. The flowers have already started to wilt.....we needed to hurry."

"Hopefully he'll be able to have his meal successfully."

Satou nodded gravely.

"There's no need to worry. He has managed to find his *meals* quite nicely."

".....finding and *having* a meal are two different things, aren't they?"

"Do you think that child will refuse his meals?"

"That's not what I'm saying.....but....."

"!"

As soon as Satou tried to argue back they heard a thunderous sound from the ground. There was a loud rumble along with a shaking from the depths of the earth. It continued as the building started to creak.

"Another one.....the shadows may be moving."

".....that's not a good sign."

".....yes. Keep an eye on the town."

“Understood.”

Mikoto disappeared behind the bamboo blinds. Satou watched her back as she walked away then bowed before he withdrew from the room. The shaking continued for a while longer. One of the candles on the two candlesticks suddenly went out, making the room a little dimmer.

“I’m just prolonging this town of shadows.”

This time no one heard her words other than herself.

The dry winter wind blew past the susuki grass. It was a deserted land with nothing other than abandoned and rusty heavy machinery where not even trees grew. Normally it was a land where no one went, nor was it used for anything. It was a wasteland. The constant rustling was noisy. There was once a small shrine there long ago, but even that was now abandoned and rotting away. No one ever went there. The only time people visited was during the annual winter festival. The procession continued on until the area with the shrine. The ritual became meaningless a long time ago. The earthquake stopped after a while.

There was a man standing completely still. He stood quietly as if he were listening carefully to something. The hem of his long coat fluttered, and the hood covered his eyes. Although his expression was imperceptible, his mouth was warped into a wide smile. It was difficult to tell if it was a happy, or annoyed smile.

“Aah.....”

His voice was raspy.

“I’m...hungry.”

Seemingly bored, that’s all the man said before he started walking. He walked as if he had no particular destination.

He headed down the same route to the kindergarten as yesterday, avoiding the evening foot traffic. As the sky turned the dark blue of twilight today as well, he felt as though the shortness of the days meant there was still a while before spring arrived. The earthquake that happened after midnight was the cause of his inadequate amount of sleep. Somehow making it through class, he suppressed several yawns as he walked.

“We’re a little late, huh.”

Yue walked next to Tougo, the clacking of his geta echoing.

“That’s because you guys were late.”

Akiyoshi had dragged Tougo to the park after class, but Yue didn’t show up for a while. It wasn’t like they promised to meet, so he wasn’t going to complain. However, waiting alone with Akiyoshi was rather exhausting. So he was allowed at least one complaint. Yue laughed at Tougo’s words with a hurt face. He had come all the way to the school to meet him, but seemed to have been asked by his classmate Suzuki to rescue Tougo who he thought had been kidnapped.

“How cruel. We were told Tsubaki had been kidnapped so we put all our effort into looking for you.”

“Right!? That kid told us you were taken away by some suspicious guy, so we ran around all over the place, we’re totally exhausted.”

Siding with him, Kurogitsune waved his tail around.

“Weren’t you on my shoulder the whole time, Kurogitsune?”

“I was helping with the search, wasn’t I?”

“I wonder.....”

“Hey, Yue! What are you trying to say!?”

“Ahaha, kidding, kidding.”

The way they were talking, they didn’t seem to be serious at all.

“Well, I’m glad you weren’t really kidnapped, Tsubaki.”

The moment Yue smiled calmly, Akiyoshi instantly interjected from beside him.

“If anyone was going to kidnap him, it’d be you guys, wouldn’t it?”

“You still don’t trust me, Akiyoshi?”

“What do you mean *still*, I will be nothing but suspicious of you from the beginning to the end.”

Tougo couldn’t let Akiyoshi get worked up as usual without saying anything.

“Weren’t you the one who forced me to go to park with you?”

“That was to protect you, Tsubaki. I had no choice.”

Tougo figured he’d be used to his lack of restraint and sarcasm by now.

“I keep telling you I don’t need to be protected.”

Tougo never asked for Akiyoshi’s overzealous deeds.

“But, you guys waited for me.”

Yue said happily.

“.....whatever.”

That was the best he could reply. He didn’t have to wait for Yue, nor would Akiyoshi have minded if he had blown him off and gone home. Tougo was tired of trying to understand why he didn’t just leave the park, or any of his own actions lately.

Hina was waiting in front of the kindergarten with an outstretched neck waiting for someone to pick her up. Since it was much later compared to yesterday, most of the kindergarteners seemed to have already gone home. There weren’t many parents or siblings passing by either.

“Ah, oniichan!”

“Hey, Hina, sorry for the wait.”

“You’re with your friends today too? Yue-kun, and.....masked glasses guy!”

Hina greeted Tougo and the other two with a high-five. However, Akiyoshi didn’t seem to like being called masked

glasses guy.

“.....could you stop calling me that, please?”

Perhaps not used to asking children for things, Akiyoshi spoke in a tone with less force than usual and knelt down in front of Hina.

“The most obvious name is the easiest to remember, right?”

“.....that’s true, but...”

Tougo suggested an alternative to Akiyoshi who still couldn’t understand.

“Hmmm. All right, Akky should be fine, Hina.”

“.....Akky, huh.....”

He mulled over his own nickname.

“Akiyoshi seems happy~”

“You’re always making ridiculous requests like *don’t call me by my last name* or whatever. Now you can’t complain, right?”

Yue who was looking at him, and Hina in Tougo’s sight both called out *Akky* repeatedly.

“Oh, Tougo-kun.”

A teacher called out to him when Hina returned to her classroom to grab her bag. She started the conversation by mentioning the kindergarten graduation next month, and how they were thankful she was able to acquire some guys to help out, then spoke about the particulars of the actual day. Since Tougo and Yaiichi helped out with the kindergarten’s events often, and Yaiichi was amicable along with his flexible work schedule, they were considered quite an asset.

“You’ve helped us out. We really are relieved to have some men helping out. Could your friends help out this time as well?”

“Ah, yes. Though I’m not sure how useful they’ll be. I’ll ask the principal for more details next week.”

“Oh, I see. How nice. The staff will be having preparatory meetings, other than that, we may ask for you guys to do things like change out the notices since we can’t reach some of the places.....huh, *principal*?”

It looked like they really were shorthanded, so the teacher was ecstatic for help. However, her joy suddenly changed into an expression of confusion.

“What are you talking about, Tougo-kun? We don’t have a principal here.”

“.....huh?”

This time it was Tougo’s turn to be at a loss for words.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

The teacher knit her brow as she tilted her head to the opposite side this time.

“Tsubaki? What’s wrong?”

Yue who was playing tag with Hina and Akiyoshi came back when he sensed the change in the mood.

"I met with the principal yesterday though."

"Huh? But we've never had anyone in that sort of position here. Are you sure you aren't mistaking them for someone else?"

Tougo who had been dropping off and picking up Hina ever since she was in the preschool classes wouldn't mistake who he saw. Even his companions seemed to know that.

"The principal was the one who asked us to help with the kindergarten graduation."

Yue and Akiyoshi nodded beside him.

".....come to think of it, who *did* I hear that Tougo-kun was helping out from?"

"I also spoke to the principal yesterday."

"Me too."

From what those two were saying, the anomalies of their conversation were adding up. The teacher searched her memory as she shook her head.

"Hina also said goodbye to the principal yesterday."

"How strange.....a whole group having the same dream."

In the end she settled on it must have been their imagination.

"There was no way that was a dream."

"But, that's what actually happened, isn't it?how mysterious."

She nodded several times with her arms crossed as if she liked her own conclusion. Akiyoshi tried to argue but he was unable to offer any proof otherwise and could make no more progress than that. Tougo cut the conversation short for the moment, so they could talk about this situation while they walked home.

On the way home, he smelled the warm smell of someone preparing their dinner wafting from a house's kitchen they happened to pass. Since they had idled so long at the kindergarten, the sky was darker on their way home than yesterday. The low red moon rose, faintly illuminating the winter sky. The howling of some home's dog pierced his ears unusually sharp today.

"What the heck was that about?"

Tougo muttered with a sigh.

"This is pretty serious.....the principal's disappearance, huh."

"From what they were saying it sounded like he had never existed in the first place, rather than disappeared."

Akiyoshi crossed his arms tighter as he nodded.

"Yes.....I know this phenomenon."

"Huh?"

“He was spirited away.”

Akiyoshi informed them solemnly in a lowered voice. Even though he should have burst out laughing, Tougo was unable to deny it right away. He felt breathless, as if something were constricting him around his chest.

“.....spirited away.”

“This appears to be something we need to discuss properly. The garden should be an adequate location. Right, fox mask?”

“!”

Yue who was being pulled by Hina’s hand a few steps ahead, and Kurogitsune looked back at the same time.

“Uuh.....yeah, I wonder what’s going on?”

“Don’t play dumb, I’ll make you confess everything.”

Akiyoshi pushed up his black frame glasses, glaring into the distance. Yue and Hina furrowed their brows with an indescribable expression.

“What a creepy guy.”

Kurogitsune exposed what all of them were thinking deep down.

“I need to take Hina home first, so you guys go on ahead. I’ll go later.”

“Huuuh? Only Hina has to stay home?”

Hina pouted. Yue interjected from beside her.

“We’ll drop her off with you, Tsubaki. It’s dangerous just for you and Hina-chan to be alone right now.”

At his words that seemed to know everything, Tougo remembered the monsters he had momentarily forgotten. He remembered the things that would appear during dusk or perhaps from the shadows, the things that were like a black mass of darkness trying to swallow the young Tougo whole. It had been a while since he had come across any, so Tougo had completely forgotten about their existence. However...

“Dangerous.....?”

“It’ll be all right, Tsubaki, because I’ll protect you.”

“.....huh?”

“That’s right, that’s right! Leave it to us, and take it easy!”

Indifferent to the uneasiness hanging over him, Yue and Kurogitsune puffed out their chests proudly at the same time. Once again, he overlapped with the traces of the person who would always rescue Tougo when he was young, and it made his chest stir. Yue was similar to that person. Though he wasn’t sure why. The moment he opened his mouth to refuse, Akiyoshi forced his way between Tougo and Yue. He then settled on a pose of pushing up his glasses as he looked back and forth between the both of them.

“You’ve got some nerve, fox mask. Like I’d let you go with Tsubaki alone. I will also go to drop off little sister Tsubaki.”

“You’re coming too.....?”

"It is my assumption that he'll use this opportunity to enact his plan to deceive you, Tsubaki."

His voice sounded muffled through his mask.

"Yaaay! Let's go together!"

Hina innocently guided the group toward Tougo's house. Hina grabbed Akiyoshi's hand, but Tougo was shocked when he told her she'd catch his hay fever and frantically pulled his hand away.

"Hey, Kurogitsune. He was eaten, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. Somehow this ended up being more trouble than it should have been."

A little further away Yue and Kurogitsune were whispering to each other.

"What should I do?"

"Well, for now all we can do is keep an eye on things."

Kurogitsune shrugged.

"We don't know who did it yet either."

He added on.

"Was it one of us, someone from the town, or....."

"I don't know. Anyway, don't let those guys out of your sight."

Yue nodded with Kurogitsune still on his shoulder.

"I have.....a really bad feeling."

Kurogitsune, who was usually the epitome of optimism, making such a serious face made Yue more nervous than he thought. Yue knew he wouldn't be much help. Still not entirely sure what sort of disturbance was occurring, he was unable to ask about it either.

".....Kurogitsune. But.....ah."

Not realizing his steps had slowed down, a bell rang as a bicycle went by him. Noticing that Yue had fallen behind, Hina turned to him waving her hand. The two of them sped up their steps to catch up with Tougo and Akiyoshi.

"Well, hurry up and get along with them, deceive them, and lead them by the nose to the mistress."

Kurogitsune said as cheerfully as he could in his ear.

By the time the group had taken Hina home and arrived at the park, the traces of evening disappeared from the sky as the red moon rose up, shining clearly.

"Tsubaki's dad was enthusiastic about dinner, huh~"

Yue and the others must have heard about Yaiichi's fervor while they were waiting in the entranceway.

"That guy's enthusiasm isn't a good thing."

When he got home he couldn't have even imagined the disastrous scene in the kitchen. Today was one of the rare days his father was home waiting for Hina and Tougo's return. It was a Tsubaki family rule that whoever was home first made dinner. He could see that his father who hadn't been on dinner duty in a while was enthusiastic, but he wasn't very good at cooking to begin with. It was rare that any of them could eat the meals their father innocently did his best to make on his dinner duty day, so this rule was one of the sources of Hina and Tougo's troubles.

"Haaa..... I hope Hina can stop him somehow."

"By the way, Tsubaki's house smells really good for some reason."

Seeming to remember Tougo's house, Yue suddenly said something strange.

"Really?"

"I'm not really sure, but could it be the smell of the camellia flowers?"

Unable to think of any other source, Tougo agreed as he turned to Akiyoshi.

"That may be it. Hmmm.....I can't really explain it, but it's kind of a nostalgic.....yummy smell."

"I don't know what you mean. Maybe you're just hungry."

Having it pointed out by Tougo, Yue looked down at his stomach through his shirt that wasn't suitable for the season at all, and laughed.

"I'm.....probably hungry."

"Then let's hurry up and get to the point."

Their meeting at the park started with Akiyoshi's raised voice. Yue and Tougo settled themselves down on the swings while Akiyoshi leaned against the fence in front of them, with one leg propped up against it. *Isn't that tiring*, Tougo asked, but Akiyoshi replied he was able to relax in that pose.

"The disappearance of the principal, right?"

Yue opened his mouth first as the chains of the swing creaked. Akiyoshi nodded deeply.

"I've heard rumors of there being several missing person cases lately."

Tougo had also heard similar stories.

"Now that you mention it, I've been hearing those sort of things at school every once in a while."

"I've been doing my own investigations over the past few days, but....."

He felt as though he had heard stories of people suddenly disappearing lately when Akiyoshi spoke. Whether it was a rumor, or hearsay, whenever the story's origin was attempted to be determined, in the end, it was never arrived at. Due to that, it was frequently treated at school as a type of ghost story, but unfortunately there were a lot of variations of the stories that involved someone's relatives or friends. Plus now that they were focusing on it here, it did seem unnatural.

"I've been investigating based on each of the stories, but in most of the cases, who disappeared, or—did that person exist to begin with is unclear."

"Like the principal today?"

Yue asked back.

“Yes. Depending on the situation, I’ve been told that the people who were in a panic about the disappearances at first, after a few days were unsure if they existed in the first place.”

“So the people who knew them eventually start to lose their memories of them?”

It suddenly became difficult for him to believe. Their existence will eventually start to fade in a few days? Tougo figured it would take much longer for time to erase the traces of anyone.

“Most likely. Not everyone forgets all at the same time, it’s different for each person with memories of them. Just, I assume eventually everyone forgets in most cases.”

“In other words, it’s like they were spirited away?”

Exactly, Akiyoshi nodded in consent. The words *spirited away* left a bitter taste on Tougo’s tongue. Perhaps it was a sign of Tougo’s discomfort, but the creaking sound of the chains connected to the swing he was sitting on hurt his ears.

“But we remember the principal, right?”

“Indeed. There’s a special reason why Tsubaki and I haven’t forgotten.”

“Reason?”

“Yes. It’s.....well, since a detailed explanation would take too long, I’ll keep it simple, you and I are predisposed to this sort of thing.”

Predisposed, Tougo repeated. Akiyoshi nodded in silence.

“You would remember, Tsubaki.but, why haven’t you forgotten, fox mask?”

“Huh.....?”

Akiyoshi started to attack Yue who was at a loss for words. He stood up straight taking his body weight completely off of the fence then approached Yue one step at a time.

“That’s because you’re the culprit, right?”

“.....!? What are you saying!?”

Getting angry before Yue, Kurogitsune barked at Akiyoshi, his fur on end.

“Suddenly raising your voice like that, I must have hit the nail on the head. Your tail gives everything away so quickly, must be inconvenient.”

“Wha!? Idiot, we don’t do stuff like that, me or Yue!”

“That’s right. I didn’t do it.”

Yue also looked confused by suddenly being treated like a criminal.

“Don’t play dumb. You’re the culprit.....or, someone close to you is.”

Setting aside Yue’s excuses, and deciding on his guilt, Akiyoshi took another step toward him.

“Don’t just jump to conclusions. I really don’t know anything. I told you I didn’t do it. Jeez, Tsubaki, don’t stay quiet,

help me.”

For now, he wasn't sure he could consider Yue the culprit any differently than Akiyoshi. However, if he made Yue go away now, Tougo would be at a loss. There was no way he could trust someone he only met a few days ago. It was because of that point that Tougo had no intention of sticking up for Yue, but he was the only clue to the traces of a person he continued to search for. If Yue wasn't that person himself, and could give him any sort of clue, then it may be no more than Tougo's own misunderstanding. The possibility of that being the case was far from high though, so pretending not to know anything, and washing his hands of him would be the right choice.

However...

“.....in other words, we should look for the actual culprit, right?”

Saying something unexpected, the two of them turned their puzzled looks toward him.

“Hrm. Fox mask, when did you coerce Tsubaki to be on your side? You're rather sneaky.”

“Wait a sec, I didn't do anything like that. The way you've been sticking to Tsubaki, there's no way I'd even have the chance.”

“The way you keep making excuses is repulsive.”

“You too, Akiyoshi, don't jump to conclusions without any proof.”

Tougo resolved their continuous quarreling. When he said this, they stopped their pointless argument. He shook off his hesitation, every second counted.

“More than the actual culprit, we should find out the truth behind this case.”

“.....”

“We should investigate then.....actually, neither of you have proof so we have no choice but to investigate, right?”

“That's true, but...”

Akiyoshi agreed reluctantly.

“Are you okay with that, Tsubaki?”

There was concern in Yue's voice, but he could also sense a faint happiness. That tinge of joy inside of his hesitation may have been because he took this as Tougo's faith in him, or maybe because it gave him room to explain. This wasn't Tougo's way of coming to a decision.

“It'll be uncomfortable if we don't clear things up, right? I'm also concerned about the principal, besides.....”

“Besides?”

“.....nothing, talking to himself.”

He shook his head when he was asked for the continuation of what he said, and vaguely played it off. Yue knew of course that he shouldn't expect this to eliminate their suspicion towards him.

“If that's what we've decided, then we'll start searching for proof tomorrow. Fox mask, I'll definitely find the proof that you're the culprit.”

Akiyoshi readily turned to Yue to challenge him, but he got off the swing, ignoring it. The empty swing twisted as it

swayed.

“Jeez, tell us when you find it then.”

Yue took a few steps back before Kurogitsune who had disappeared at some point jumped back up on his shoulder.

“You guys have been talking foreeeever. It’s already past dinner time.”

When Tougo looked at his watch, it was already time for him to go home. If his dad was home in the evening that usually meant he had a nightshift job later. He’ll give Hina a bath then leave as usual, so Tougo had promised to come back before then today as well.

“I need to go home soon. It’s time for my dad to go to work.”

“I see. Then you better hurry.”

“I also need to close things here for today. It’s past curfew.”

The three of them headed toward the park exit.

“You have a curfew, Akky? You really are a rich kid.”

It was surprising for someone who looked as uninhibited as Akiyoshi to worry about something like a curfew.

“.....my father is annoying.”

Akiyoshi answered with a sour face that became even more bitter. It seemed as though being the only son of an old family with money had a lot of problems of its own.

“Bye.”

Once they left the park and walked for a bit, he said his goodbye to no one in particular at the four-way intersection.

“See you two tomorrow then.”

“Yeah, don’t run away, fox mask.”

“Don’t fight too much, you guys.”

Yue and Akiyoshi argued behind him as he started to walk away. Tougo was a little surprised he didn’t find their exchange any more annoying than a comedy routine.

“Ah, Tsubaki!”

He stopped his feet and turned around.


“Ah, um.....be careful on the way home.”

Tougo lifted his right hand a bit to reply to Yue who was smiling as he waved his hand from afar. He then hurried home. His deep gray shadow made by the streetlamps stretched out from his feet. Tougo had one other goal besides a clue to the principal’s disappearance.

—I’ll protect you, Tougo-kun.

The person that suddenly disappeared, and the person who suddenly appeared before him. The reason why he disappeared, and the reason why *he* appeared all of a sudden. They didn’t seem connected, but he still felt like they were linked in some way. Tougo was searching for clues to the person Yue spoke and behaved so similarly to.

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

 frillyfujoshitranslations.tumblr.com/post/135686234162/akaya-akashiya-ayakashino-kagekui-machi-no

Chapter 4 A Nostalgic Wound

The dry sound of his geta echoed loudly from the asphalt. Yue parted from the other two, and walked down the road toward the shrine. Every time the old streetlamps along the road blinked, Yue and Kurogitsune's shadows also flickered. It was mysterious that even though the moon could be clearly seen from the shrine, the town was so dark. Despite that, when he looked up it was bright across the torii and tree tops.

"Haaa, what a crazy day this was. Are you all right, Yue? Are you tired?"

Kurogitsune asked concerned as he pat his shoulder with his front paws.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I really do seem to be feeling good today."

Yue whose physical condition was normally poor had been feeling unusually well since this morning. He was able to carry on without being conscious of his hunger, fatigue and the exhaustion that accompanied them.

"If that's the case, fine, but....."

"Yeah, I wonder why everyone is so worried about me when I'm feeling fine."

Everyone at the shrine had been concerned about Yue's good health since the morning. No one, including Kurogitsune was honestly happy for him despite their surprise. Yue could do nothing but smile bitterly at their reactions.

"That's cause normally you're sluggish all the time."

"Well, that's true."

What Kurogitsune said was true. Since they always spent their time together, Kurogitsune probably knew Yue better than himself. There were a lot of things he didn't let Yue know. He had never wanted to know about them up until now.

"Well, as long as you're okay, I'm fine either way. Let's hurry up and go home, I'm getting hungry."

"Yeah."

He had a feeling the smell of someone's dinner wafting from the back door of a house facing the street was what incited Kurogitsune's appetite. That smell made Yue think of Tougo's kitchen at his house. He imagined the gentle scene of Tougo sitting around that dining table.

"Tsubaki."

When he spoke his name, he felt somewhere in his body gradually grow warm. This was probably the first time Yue had ever felt a sensation like that.

".....does this mean you really do prefer Tougo over that masked glasses guy."

Kurogitsune asked as his tail swayed back and forth.

"Well, of course you would."

He added with a thoughtful scoff.

“Yeah, I guess I could say I’m interested in him.....”

In order to put his feelings into words, Yue thought for a moment. It was partly because it was such an unknown feeling for him, but also because his vocabulary was limited he was unable to find the appropriate words.

“I can’t really explain it, but I’m glad we were able to meet.it feels nostalgic.”

“Hmmm, well, that’s good then.”

Kurogitsune didn’t seem interested in the words Yue chose. Kurogitsune scoffed once again as he stretched.

“I’m fine as long as you make sure to have your meal. The mistress, and Satou-sama will be too.”

“.....I wonder if I can. I don’t even know how yet.....”

“Who knows? It’s up to you.”

“.....hey, aren’t you acting kind of strange today, Kurogitsune?”

“Idiot, I’m the same as always, from the tips of my ears to the tip of my tail! You’re the one who’s way weirder today, being all energetic since the morni.....”

He must have pointed out the truth from the way Kurogitsune had started trying to make excuses. However, the moment he turned his argument towards Yue, his words cut off.

“This smell.....”

His ears stood on end, searching for sounds in the area. Yue was unable to ask why Kurogitsune had such a serious expression across his face as he carefully smelled the scents in the wind blowing by.

“Okay, Yue. Don’t move from here.”

“Huh, what’s wrong all of sudden?”

Kurogitsune just emphasized for him not to move before he ran off somewhere. With no time to even ask what was going on, Yue was left to watch Kurogitsune run off, feeling nothing but confused. He had a grim expression he normally could never imagine coming from Kurogitsune.

“.....there’s no way that guy is here.....”

The mysterious words he said to himself the moment he ran off just left Yue even more lost.

Yue sat down on an old bench next to the stone steps, and absentmindedly looked up at the sky. It was the area around the shrine entrance bus stop. He had heard that since no trains stopped in this town for whatever reason, the bus that ran throughout the area was the main form of public transportation. It seemed that even though there was a station, the train never came. He didn’t know why. Yue had only ever seen any of those things on the TV in the shrine’s living room. Kurogitsune said there was some sort of smell, but all Yue could feel was the calm, warm night air. Clouds started to cover the sky. The light of the moon made the thickness of the clouds more apparent. Posted crudely on the rusted sign was a handwritten notice in magic marker of the schedule changes. It seemed as though the daily stops were decreasing gradually.

“Aah.....I’m bored.”

He guessed from Kurogitsune’s expression that waiting lazily like this was the best thing he could do, but he didn’t

know what else to do other than let his mind wander.

"I guess.....I can't go to Tsubaki's house."

Waiting made it feel like time was going by way too slow. He was getting bored of waiting in that spot without moving for so long. Kurogitsune would probably get mad at him if he went home alone before him. Kurogitsune was something like his guardian after all. Besides, even Yue couldn't relax his own feelings with all these strange phenomena going on.

"Hmmm.....I'm bored....."

His geta made a dry sound as he stretched out his legs while he sat.

"It's strange."

Yue thought it was odd how bored he felt waiting for only a few minutes. Before he was allowed to go down to the town, he used to be able to spend the abundance of time he had doing absolutely nothing without thinking it was so difficult. If Yue was unable to go anywhere, or have people around him still, he wouldn't have been so bored alone. He would spend most of his time looking up at the sky until he fell asleep, usually with Kurogitsune by his side. When he thought about it, it had been quite a while since he had spent time alone.

"Maybe I could sing something?"

Unable to come up with anything better to do to kill time, that was all he could think of eventually. He felt as though singing a song while no one was around would be comforting. Singing in the crisp, cold winter air somehow seemed to suit the mood was the excuse Yue came up with in order to hide his own embarrassment. He didn't know many songs. He had never tried to learn any up until now. It was an old, nostalgic melody that came from his mouth.

Tougo didn't know why he was going down this road. The reality was he was unusually anxious for some reason. It couldn't have been any more than half an hour since he had waved goodbye to Yue and Akiyoshi. After he got home, he met his father at the door to tell him he was going out again for a little while, only leaving his school bag behind. He didn't have any particular reason. He just wanted to talk to Yue. Tomorrow would have been fine, he thought in his head, but he was unable to suppress his restless feelings. He hurried toward the direction Yue had walked when they parted. Away from the urban areas was a quiet residential neighborhood. He went down a back street with even less people around. It seemed to be a road in this area that was only used to go to the shrine. The street Tougo was going down ended at a T-junction in front of the shrine. The road only went left and right, but he was able to go straight up the path to the shrine on foot. During the festival from the other day, it looked crowded, but during the other seasons it was generally deserted.

Under the torii were stairs that extended upwards with several mercury lamps set up on them. Carved into each one were the characters for "votive lamp", and the names of donators. It wasn't pitch dark, but close to it. Even when he looked up from the bottom of the stairs, it was difficult to see ahead. Every once in a while the wind bent the winter withered branches of the mountain trees. Illuminated by a white light, they looked like the outlines of some sort of creature. At the bottom of the long stone staircase that continued on to the shrine grounds were a pair of stone fox statues, one of which that seemed to be crumbling, and a torii with a plaque that read "Utsuwa Shrine". Placed in front of the old bus stop timetable chart was a sun-bleached, faded blue bench. The mercury lamps made a familiar silhouette stand out.

"....."

Even though he had come after him, Tougo didn't feel happy at all that Yue was there, and stopped his steps. They

had just parted, but even if he showed up all of sudden, Yue probably wouldn't find that strange or suspicious. Tougo was aware he was doing something to Yue that he had done to him before. When Tougo realized that, he felt confused and disgusted. There was no mistake that his own actions now would be suspicious to Yue. That's what he figured, but with Yue's lack of common sense and somewhat ethereal personality, he could have probably settled things just by saying he wanted to talk. In the end, Tougo bet on the latter. Since it was darker near Tougo, Yue didn't seem to notice him yet. The moment he got closer to speak to him, his feet stopped. He heard Yue singing something to himself. It was a song he recognized. He had heard it numerous times in his childhood. The melody that was sung during the festival procession, sung in his voice, made Tougo feel as though Yue was from another world, or he that he would be taken there by him. He then felt a dizzying nostalgia.

"Huh, Tsubaki? What are you doing here?"

Yue's eyes widened in surprise when he noticed Tougo. It only seemed strange to him that Tougo was there. He could read no suspicion or confusion in his face.

"That song."

"Huh?"

"How....."

How do you know that song?

Why are you singing it?

Why are you here now?

It was by no means an unknown song in Utsuwa town. At the very least, everyone had a chance to hear it every year during the procession at the grand festival. There would be nothing strange about Yue saying he knew it. So why would he ask how he knew it? What would he find out from asking that? He had things he wanted to ask, but Tougo was unable to find the right words.

"Uuuh.....I don't really get it, but.....is there something wrong, Tsubaki?"

Did you come after me? Yue smiled as he tilted his head, ignoring Tougo's uneasiness.

"Ah.....no....."

"I was just thinking about you, Tsubaki, so you being here now really surprised me."

Yue's nonchalance always confused Tougo. It was the same now.

"What is it? What about that song.....?"

Unable to answer right away, he hesitated to speak, but Yue's gaze suddenly wandered.

"Huh.....what is this?"

He was looking all round, but when Tougo followed his gaze, he couldn't see anything. However, Yue seemed to have sensed some change.

"Someone's coming."

His voice was strained. Tension also ran through Tougo's whole body, even though he wasn't sure why. He couldn't figure out what was going on at all.

“Who.....?”

When he strained his eyes in the darkness, a shadowy figure appeared as if it had emerged from the darkness of the night. It was a tall man in a long hooded coat, wearing dark clothes and shoes, carrying a long pole. There was a tattoo-like design on his cheek, and a white scarf that looked like an animal's tail around his neck. He stood out in this quiet residential area. He seemed like someone you wouldn't forget even at first glance. Noticing Tougo and Yue, he approached them calmly without any rush. There was a faint smile across his face.

“.....hey. Nice night, isn't it?”

The man spoke. It was a deep, charming voice. His words were friendly, but his tone was threatening.

“Who are you?”

Yue asked nervously, his voice hoarse. The man stared at Yue and Tougo as if he were assessing them.

“Sagano.”

That was all he said. Hearing the name Sagano, most people would think of the area outside of town that was the final destination of the grand festival procession. As Tougo wondered if this man had some sort of connection to the Sagano area, Yue next to him seemed to have misheard his name.

“Sagano.....san?”

The man's mouth distorted in disgust as he scoffed at his reply. He seemed as if he couldn't stomach his reaction. Yue had a bewildered look on his face.

“You don't remember me?Well, whatever.”

“What do you mean?”

“.....nothing.”

The man looked down at him with the same smile he had earlier back on his face as he spoke.

“Now then, without any further delay.....give me back my body.”

As soon as he finished speaking, he lowered his stance and swung his pole down toward them. A heavy sound cut through the air. The top of the pole swung in an arc and grazed Yue's throat as he immediately jumped back.

“What are you doing all of sudden?”

Yue protested as he regained his balance, just barely dodging him. Tougo was merely in shock from his sudden actions. However, the man certainly didn't seem to notice Tougo at all in his sights.

“I meant what I said. Hey, hurry up and remember.”

He said as he swung his pole down repeatedly. Yue dodged him within a hair's width, but every time he retreated he put himself even further into a corner.

“I came to get it back.....and while we're at it...”

“!”

Yue's back bumped into the torii behind him. The man continued to close in on him.

“—let’s continue from that time.”

He laughed as he thrust the opposite side of the pole this time toward the tip of Yue’s nose.

“.....”

“Hey! That’s enough from you.”

Yue stopped Tougo from rushing over.

“Don’t come over here, Tsubaki.”

“Don’t be stupid. Who is this guy?”

He blocked him with his back as he helped Yue stand up. The man watched the two of them with a bored look without doing anything, but once he heard Tougo’s name his expression changed.





“.....hmmm.....Tsubaki, huh. *You* are.....?”

He observed Tougo from his head to his toes with a brazen look as if he were studying him. It naturally made him uncomfortable, but more importantly, he wondered what this man's intentions were.

“.....?”

“Don't you dare lay a hand on Tsubaki.”

Yue who stood back up, glared at the man. Unfazed, he laughed.

“Don't lay a hand on him, huh. Isn't that my line?”

“Right, *Tsubaki*?”

The man quietly whispered in a low voice as if to only reach Tougo's ears.

“You should be *careful*.”

“Huh.....?”

He didn't say of what, or of who. Tougo was unable to reply as he furrowed his brows. He should have asked him, *be careful of what*.

“Hey! What are you doing!?”

He heard a familiar voice from afar as the man turned around. The smile disappeared from his face.

“.....don't let your guard down around foxes.”

He said it in a way that only Tougo could hear, then disappeared. It happened in an instant. He heard no footsteps, nor did he see him leave, it was as if there was no one there to begin with. Even so, only the lingering traces of that man's deep voice remained in Tougo's ears.

“Yue, Tougo! Are you all right!?”

“Kurogitsune!”

Recognizing the owner of the voice, Yue’s expression brightened. He saw Akiyoshi rushing up to them as well from behind Kurogitsune.

“Hey, who was that guy? *What* was he? Someone you know, fox mask?”

Akiyoshi ran up to them out of breath and shot out his questions in rapid succession.

“That’s what I want to know. He showed up here all of sudden trying to start a fight.”

Yue nodded at Tougo’s reply.

“I don’t really understand, but he said his name was Sagano.”

He added on.

“Sagano, huh.....the same name as the area around the susuki field.”

Akiyoshi moved his mask out of the way as he caught his breath. His glasses that had fogged from his breath gradually started to clear.

“I had a bad feeling so I snuck out of the house, but.....looks like I was right.”

Akiyoshi fell onto the bench, and the other two did the same on each side. Perhaps to survey the area, Kurogitsune jumped up onto the timetable chart.

“You too, Kurogitsune?”

“I don’t really get it either, but.....sorry, I was after that guy’s scent, but I didn’t think he’d show up in front of you.”

He seemed to have sensed something strange as well. He must have sensed a presence different from the norm, then during the time he went to look for the owner of that scent, that man showed up.

“Do you know that man, Kurogitsune?”

All three of them looked at Kurogitsune at the same time. They all seemed to have held the same suspicion. However, Kurogitsune just evasively turned away.

“No.....of course not. There’s no way it was that guy.”

“You mistook him for someone else?”

“.....it can’t be him, this is too strange.”

Kurogitsune spoke vaguely with a lowered head. He was just asking himself things no one knew the answer to, so none of them understood what he meant.

“In other words, we don’t know anything after all.”

It didn’t matter if they tried to think of answers, all they were doing was wasting time there. On top of that, with Akiyoshi and Kurogitsune showing up, their numbers had increased, so they were starting to stand out there. It would be troublesome if someone started to question them.

"Let's go home for now."

"But, we don't know what's going on yet."

"We won't be able to resolve anything right now by just talking, tomorrow will be fine. Besides, you snuck out, didn't you? It'd be bad if you got caught, right?"

It'd be a pain if my dad gets worried too, he added before standing up. He heard Akiyoshi's annoyed mumbling from behind him, but he obediently headed home.

"See you tomorrow."

Most likely not feeling like smiling, Yue waved his hand under the street lamp. Tougo raised his hand as well, then left that place. They were unable to talk about anything relevant, on top of that, some suspicious man showed up. His problems and doubts just kept piling up. He felt fatigue overtake his entire body. He was unable to put his feelings to rest every since he met Yue that festival night. With heavy footsteps, Tougo opened the entrance to his house.

It was quiet inside of his house. Hina was already asleep at this time. His father that had a night-shift at work hadn't come home yet, so there was a simple note on top of the low table in the living room with a plate from dinner. Hina told him the menu was fried fish and boiled vegetables, but he wouldn't have been able to tell just by looking at it. He served himself some rice from the rice cooker and ate dinner alone. It was deathly quiet inside of the house. Tougo desperately tried to resist remembering the past. Once he finished cleaning up after dinner, Yaiichi came home.

"I'm home~. Aah, so tired."

He whispered as he stretched and walked down their short hallway. The old floors let out a loud creaking sound.

".....welcome home."

"Huh? You're still awake, Tougo-kun? Oh, right, it's right before exams, isn't it?"

Yaiichi entered the living room and sat on one of the cushions at the table. Just missing Tougo, he turned toward the kitchen.

"Not really.....Thanks for your hard work, do you want to eat? I'll make something."

"Huh, there's no leftovers?"

"There's only a little bit of dinner left."

He said as he opened the freezer. Tougo boiled some frozen udon they had on hand, then put a pot of water on the stove. There was a boiling sound as he peeked at the blue flame between the burner. As soon as he sunk the knife into some long onions, a sharp smell arose. The tip of the kitchen knife against the well-worn wooden cutting board made a gentle sound.

"Huh, then the two of you ate all of the food I made? I'm so happy."

"It wasn't very good. Well, you didn't burn it today, so good job."

He put in a few thinly sliced pieces of pork into the pot of boiling water, then took them out with his cooking chopsticks. He scooped out some of the foam then put in some packaged noodle broth. The smell of dashi spread lightly through the kitchen but was immediately swallowed up by the ventilation fan.

"This is the result of all your hard work. You're amazing, Tougo. You always make such delicious food. No one would ever think you were *my* son."

Tougo was annoyed by Yaichi's words that he wasn't sure were self-effacing or serious when he laughed. Yaichi had many poor fatherly traits like that.

"Is that something a parent should say?"

"Well, that's because I'm awkward and thick-headed. I really am glad you're not like me, Tougo-kun."

The onions danced inside of the pot. He put in the udon that now looked soft enough and put the lid on over it. During that time, he grabbed a bowl from the cupboard.

"Hina's your kid too, you know."

".....yeah, well."

Yaichi immediately lowered his head in thought and fell quiet. His father always laughed vaguely like that, so he didn't worry about it then either.

"It must be because Akane-chan's cooking was so delicious."

Yaichi muttered with a sigh. He pretended not to hear him as he served his father's dinner in the bowl and placed some onions and fried tofu on the top at the end. For this occasion, he had boiled the fried tofu together with mirin and soy sauce. Once he turned off the ventilation fan the room fell quiet again.

".....dad."

"Hm?"

"Here, it's done."

It was nothing special, but his dad politely put his hands together before digging in with his chopsticks.

Once his father drank down the broth he should have just left, Tougo took away his father's tableware as he spoke.

"I thought you had forgotten about Akane."

"Of course I haven't. She's my wife after all."

Yaichi's eyes widened at his son's unexpected words.

"Yeah....."

"What's this about all of a sudden? Talking about Akane-chan like this..."

He seemed to be truly surprised. It certainly had been several years since Tougo had spoken about his mother. He did his best not to talk about her, so Yaichi's surprise was natural.

"Hey, she went off on her own, didn't she.....she wasn't spirited away."

".....is that what you think, Tougo-kun?"

"She abandoned us. I knew it."

Actually, as soon as he spoke, his heart felt weighed down. He felt bitterness spread through his tongue. He had

vaguely known, but was afraid to confirm it, he always buried it deep in his chest instead. When Tougo was in elementary school, all he could do was keep his mouth shut, but it was different now. Tougo wanted the truth the adults were hiding from him to be revealed.

"I told you a long time ago that Akane-chan was spirited away to Utsuwa Mountain, didn't I?"

Yaiichi opened his mouth after he thought for a moment. Back when Akane disappeared, he had only heard bits and pieces of the story. There was a rumor that she had been spirited away to Utsuwa Mountain, but Tougo interpreted it as a story to hide the truth from children.

"I still think that now though."

"I don't think that.....I can't accept that."

From the way Yaiichi flinched at Tougo's harsh tone, he may really have believed that. Even if that wasn't all there was to it. However, Tougo couldn't accept that. Tougo was a child when it happened, but he remembered it clearly even now, the reason why a pregnant woman disappeared in the middle of winter, what Akane said when she saw that fox on the festival night.

—*You came for me.....*

—*I've been waiting for so long.....*

"Tougo-kun."

He had yet to tell anyone about that night.

".....I also have certainly thought that Akane-chan must be living in another town with someone else, but..."

Yaiichi cut off his words as he lowered his head. It fell silent. When he asked him to continue, Yaiichi lifted his face and smiled to evade him.

"Let's stop talking about this. Right now."

It was that smile of his that Tougo hated. That expression that was just him giving up always annoyed Tougo. He just couldn't tolerate Yaiichi's passive attitude that was different from him accepting or overcoming the circumstances he couldn't do anything about.

"You may get mad at me for saying this, but I'm content with just you and Hina-chan in this house."

".....then..."

Did that mean if he had Tougo, he could let Akane go that night? Did Akane not love Yaiichi anymore?

Or...

Or could it be Yaiichi actually forgave Akane's betrayal? As long as he had Tougo he was all right? Didn't that just make Tougo a replacement for Akane? Hina too? He had a feeling all of his assumptions were wrong. But the fact that Yaiichi never searched for her, tormented Tougo.

"Thanks for the food, it was delicious. Really."

Yaiichi stood up and told him not to stay up too late before he left the room.

".....good night."

It took all Tougo had to reply to him.

—.....*don't let your guard down around foxes.*

That man had told him that. The one who took Akane away, and the one who came to see Tougo was a fox. He was also the one who protected Tougo when he was young.

“A fox.....”

What was that man—Sagano—implying? Tougo had a feeling that the root of all his doubts was being hidden from him.

Aah, this dream again, Tougo thought. The sound of the Japanese band echoed through the festival night. He knew this dream. This scene had played out over and over again, repeatedly since he was young.

“Akane, Akane!”

A young Tougo chased after his mother. Tougo was almost running through the crowd so he wouldn't get left behind.

“.....Akane, don't wander off on your own. Jeez, it's dangerous.”

He chided her, sounding like a competent adult.

“Yaiichi will worry, okay? Don't pout cause that guy had to work so he couldn't come.”

Akane turned to Tougo with a smile, then immediately continued forward. She lowered the speed of her steps just a little. Tougo knew she was trying to match his speed. Akane was singing a song. She often sang that song to herself. Akane was looking forward to winter's grand festival. She was counting down the days the whole family could go out together, saying she couldn't wait every day. Tougo was the same. Yaiichi couldn't go out with them because of some coincidental bad luck, so it wasn't his fault. He just happened to have work that day, and since it was last minute, was unable to take the day off. A writer just starting out couldn't pick and chose his jobs. Tougo and Akane both knew that. That's why only the two of them went out.

“That song again? Don't try to hide it, you're pouting.....”

Akane didn't answer. When Tougo tried to argue with her further, Akane suddenly came to a stop. Noticing it a moment too late, Tougo's face bumped into her back.

“Ooow.....what's wrong, Akane?”

When he looked past Akane's straighted back, he saw crimson pinwheels spinning all at once.

Rattle, rattle, rattle.....

Rattle, rattle, rattle.....

Akane's gaze was fixed ahead of them. Beyond the numerous pinwheels was a man with a clearly different atmosphere from the people around him. He couldn't see his face that was hidden by a papier-mâché fox mask. He was wearing a kimono with hakama which was unusual even on a festival day.

“Akane.....there's a fox here.”

Tougo muttered unsure. The fox looked toward him as well. No, not at Tougo, but at Akane.

“Akane?”

Akane was also staring at the fox silently.

“Akane?”

His mother questioned the fox.

“You’re in a place like this?”

The fox didn’t answer. Instead, he held out a single red pinwheel towards her. It fell silent at that point.

The pendulum clock on the wall chimed twice, waking Yue from his sleep. He opened his eyes in his futon, morning was still far off. Kurogitsune was curled up on a cushion next to Yue’s futon. His fluffy stomach moved up and down in unison with his steady breathing.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been awake in the middle of the night.”

He was unusually fascinated by how much louder his words to himself sounded in the middle of the night. He had a dream. It was a scene from the festival, even though he had only gone to the festival for the first time the other day. It was a place he had only gone to once, but he had a feeling he knew it. He saw a young boy being led by the hand by someone who seemed to be his mother. He familiar with both of them, they were nostalgic vestiges. He didn’t know why though.

“I wonder who they were.”

He turned over heavily in his futon. The cold night wind slipped into the futon opening. He must have been sweating, his kimono for sleep was damp.

“.....huh?”

When Yue tried to close his eyes again there was a voice echoing directly into his head. It was a faint presence that he wouldn’t even notice if he wasn’t paying attention. He knew the person living inside of him was speaking to him. He was unable to catch his words. He just felt a presence, like a whispering voice. It was similar to faint ripples on water. Yue strained his ears.

“Aah.....I see. That was.....”

Once he realized it, he felt his heart ache painfully.

“That was Tsubaki when he was little.....and then, I wonder who that other person was.....?”

The voice inside of Yue didn’t answer his question.

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

 frillyfujoshitranslations.tumblr.com/post/136495688742/akaya-akashiya-ayakashino-kagekui-machi-no

Chapter 5 Happy Memories

Resting his hand holding a piece of chalk, the teacher pointed out the page inside of the world history textbook. The sound of pages being flipped through arose throughout the classroom. The middle-aged teacher started to explain the first paragraph. It wasn't unusual for there to be students with their heads down on their desks the period after lunch break, but today everyone was unusually attentive as they listened to him speak. Finals were approaching so it was clear that the lesson was covering things that would be on the exam. The teacher was aware of this so he focused on those details. Tougo was looking outside at nothing in particular. The light rain falling since the morning had stopped, turning the ground a deep brown. Sometimes the voices from the PE class on the outdoor volleyball court reached his ears. Over the past few days, he hadn't been paying much attention in class. He wasn't even sure if he was sleeping at night. He felt as though his exhaustion was just getting worse. Even if he made it to final exams, his current lifestyle was becoming a problem. His days spent with his mind in a fog felt worst of all. Lately he was remembering the past quite a lot. It had started to happen more often when Yue showed up. As soon as he thought he had forgotten, they were vividly revived like day dreams. However, to Tougo, there wasn't a single good memory among them.

It was dusk. He kicked the asphalt, and one of his small shoes had fallen off. It was a blue sneaker. A black shadow-like thing grazed the child's thin legs. It swiped at his injured leg when he tried to run away, knocking Tougo on his backside. The slippery black thing slowly moving closer to him was like the dusk stretching across the ground had a physical form. It had eyes like gaping, empty holes. Its mouth was open into a delighted shape. He didn't know if it even had emotions in the first place. A sound that wasn't quite a voice, hissed as it slowly approached him. It didn't have footsteps. Nor could he even spot any feet. Its two slender, dead branch-like arms stretched out. Its thin hands trying to capture its prey were creepy. Tougo scooted back, still on his backside. His scraped knees were covered in blood, but he wasn't all that concerned about them.

—.....fo.....od.....

It emitted an incoherent voice mixed with a sigh. He thought he heard it say food, but he wasn't sure if that was what it really said. It was probably trying to eat him. He probably wouldn't be able to escape. He was thinking unusually calm in his mind. Just because he was calm, didn't mean he wasn't frightened. There was a damp sweat clinging to his hands. This wasn't the first time he had been attacked by shadow-like monsters. It was always during the faint darkness of dusk. If it was on his way home from school, or after he had parted with his friends, he was able to just barely escape. Those things wouldn't come after him if he were in his house. It should have been like that today.

—*I need to go grab the thing I forgot.*

On his way home from playing with his friends at the park, Tougo realized he had left his scarf behind, and rushed back to grab it. Since he liked it, he couldn't wait until tomorrow, plus he wanted to wear it when he went to school. When he came back to the park almost running, he immediately felt a presence chasing him from behind.

—.....o.....od.....

—*Why?*

Why me?

More than fear, he felt resentment. He touched the ground around the bushes behind him. He could go no further. When he tried to escape—he immediately looked around, but with nowhere to run, it was pointless. Its withered

branch hands stretched out toward him. It looked at Tougo with its gaping empty eyes full of joy. Fear ran down his back. His whole body was imbued with a cold sweat.

(I'm scared)

(Scared, scared, scared)

In order to dispel the fear washing over him, Tougo closed his eyes and curled up. He knew it couldn't get rid of his fear, but he didn't know any other way.

—yum...my...fo...o.....d

He heard it clearly this time. It touched Tougo with its thin hands as if were clinging to him, or showing him affection.

(Help)

.....it felt like he had been touched. He heard the sound of a strong wind all around him. Since his eyes were closed, Tougo wasn't sure what happened, but it felt as though the heavy air had been swept away. When he timidly opened his eyes, the knobby grotesque arm was gone, the black shadow disappeared. There were soot-like traces of the monster scattered across the ground, but even that also vanished.

"Are you all right?"

The one who spoke to him was a suspicious man wearing a mask. Even though he had helped him, he couldn't see his face, and his clothes looked old fashioned, so he was suspicious. Tougo brushed off the dirt from his hands and stood up.

".....who are you?"

".....uum.....er."

The man wearing the mask looked around frantically, then said he was just a passerby, which was clearly a lie anyone could see through.

"*That* thing is really suspicious."

More than wanting to thank him, more than anything, Tougo couldn't help wondering about that mask. The spotted headband around its forehead, pouty lips, and five o'clock shadow gave it a distinct look. That so called *hyottoko* mask, surprisingly, didn't suit his—kimono and hakama—below it.

"R-Really? Is it weird.....?"

Tougo laughed. He couldn't believe the person himself wasn't aware of that.

"It's weird that you *don't* think it's weird to wear that thing. Is there a reason why you're hiding your face?"

"Hmmm, well..... I'm too embarrassed to show my face."

"Isn't that thing even more weird though?"

"Aha.....I don't really want to be seen by anyone I know."

His gentle voice that laughed apologetically was completely opposite of his odd appearance. Now that they were talking, even Tougo's vigilance was fading.

"I won't tell you to take it off.....even though it's weird."

"Thanks."

He was clearly relieved as he put a hand to his chest. The man introduced himself as Yoshiki. He reminded him to absolutely keep it a secret. As a child, Tougo could appreciate there being someone else with strange circumstances.

".....um, that weird thing from earlier. Did you get rid of it?"

"Aah, yeah. Sorry, I was a little late."

His mask was slanted, so he could tell he was tilting his head.

"It's fine. I'm used to it.I thought it was going to be bad this time though."

"Sorry I was late."

He still didn't know why he was apologizing, but Tougo wasn't going to question him about it.

"Those weird things.....those things that look like monsters. They're always trying to take me away. Did you know that too?"

He nodded with his mask. He knew about them, or maybe he knew about Tougo getting attacked by them. Perhaps he knew about both.

"I must be cursed."

There was no one in his class going through the same. He was starting to vaguely realize that maybe it was only him.

".....Tougo-kun."

"? How do you know my name?"

"Ah, well, that's.....there are various reasons why..."

The masked man seemed hesitant to talk about himself. Since he could tell he was at a loss, Tougo felt bad for him, and changed the subject.

"Hey, are you the one who helped me before? Whenever those monsters like from earlier show up, someone always comes to get rid of them."

".....yeah."

It confused Tougo when he nodded honestly for the first time.

"You're not cursed, or hexed at all. I'm sorry this is happening to you."

"It's not your fault. It's fine, I'm used to it."

I'll run away faster next time, Tougo added.

He was just careless this time. If he did it right, he would definitely be all right. Even though Tougo showed him a smile, the masked man looked hurt as he spoke.

"I'll protect you. For your father, and mother's sake."

The tone of his voice sounded determined, and he could tell it wasn't a way to put Tougo at ease.

"Do you know them?"

"Yeah.....from a long time ago."

".....don't tell them, they'll worry."

"Got it, I promise.we can't see each other anymore anyway."

His voice was sad. He wondered what it was like to never be able to see an old friend again. Tougo couldn't imagine it at all.

"Well, let's go home. Before it gets dark."

The man in the hyottoko mask tried to take Tougo's hand. Tougo slipped away from it.

"With you? No way, I don't want to walk with someone in such a weird mask."

"Uwh.....is it really that weird?"

His direct words seemed to hurt his feelings.

"The festival is soon, you know. You should buy a fox one then."

It was just a thought, but when he said it, it seemed like a good idea. After the man in the hyottoko mask thought for a moment, he agreed with him in a somewhat cheerful voice.

"I'm going to the festival with Akane and Yaiichi. Yaiichi normally isn't at home, so it's been a while since we've all gone out....."

He looked at him happily, and nodded as Tougo opened up to him.

"I see. How nice."

".....are you going to the festival too?"

Realizing he was being way too enthusiastic, Tougo looked up at the hyottoko mask. He was tall, and slender, but he had a feeling he was similar to his mother somehow. He didn't reply right away.

"—Yeah. It would be nice if I could go."

That was all he said. At the time, Tougo didn't pay attention to what he actually meant by that.

"Well, if you go, definitely get a fox mask.....and then..."

When he thought about it later, he didn't know at that time, but the next instance would be when he went out with his mother. He had no way of knowing then. Tougo innocently suggested a fox mask, then started to head home as it began to get increasingly darker.

"Next time you come to help, don't hide, make sure to come out."

"Got it, I promise."

Tougo knew he was watching over him until he turned the corner, and could no longer see him. That was why Tougo didn't turn around.

“Wow, you really surprised me today~”

His classmate Suzuki spoke to him in such an enthusiastic way that he wasn't sure if he were surprised or happy. They were changing their shoes in the entranceway. Suzuki's shortness was to the point where he had to look up at Tougo.

“I can't believe you dozed off during class like that, Tsubaki. Even the teacher thought it was odd, and was surprised. Did you stay up late studying?”

His classmate who always wanted to be helpful used this opportunity to talk on and on. He didn't have any ulterior motives, he was just purely happy to have a chance to talk to Tougo. He was going at an intensity that if he had a tail it would be wagging, instead his striped scarf was springing up and down, matching his movements.

“Hmmm.....I just had a bad dream.”

“Huh!? Even Tsubaki has dreams, huh?”

“You're quick to say rude things, Suzuki.”

Takahashi who had been listening to their conversation next to them was half joking, half shocked, but Suzuki didn't notice at all.

“Speaking of which, I've been having dreams lately. They've been about mountains of notebooks.....no matter how much I wrote and wrote, they wouldn't end, and I'd wonder why I was so happy as I sob, then I'd wake up.”

“As usual, you have a one track mind, huh~”

Suzuki had brought him notes as soon as class had ended the other day, but he had written a disturbing amount for just one class period. A dream about taking notes at that sort of momentum would be unmistakably a nightmare for anyone other than Suzuki, Tougo thought.

“No, it's nothing like that. I've just been having bad dreams.”

“Yeah, I understand. I've also had several nights where I couldn't sleep, and I was saved by notes.....”

Takahashi seemed to judge that it was best to avoid talking about notes as he muttered, deeply moved.

“Even you have sleepless nights, huh.....”

The three of them in a row headed to the school gate behind the building. There were still a lot of students trying to go home early around the area.

“You're pretty rude to me, Takahashi.....huh? Toochika.....is here again.....!”

Suzuki pointed at Akiyoshi who was leaning his back against the school gate the same way he had done a few days ago. Even if he wasn't blocking it like last time, he was still more than suspicious.

“You're late, Tsubaki. Let's go.”

He approached him briskly, and forcibly grasped Tougo's hand. Backing away in surprise, Takahashi gave his honest opinion.

“You attract some really weird guys, huh.....”

"I'm not happy about that at all."

"Now then, we don't have time for idle chatter. Let's go."

He waved to the two standing in shock as he was forcefully dragged away.

"Ah, uh, see you tomorrow then."

".....Tsubaki really does attract some weird guys....."

Once they passed the school gate, he heard Suzuki's voice from behind him.

"Tsubaki—I don't really understand what's going on, but be careful!"

"You're so noisy, striped four-eyes."

"You wear glasses too, you know."

Suzuki looked even more nervous.

"Um, Tsubaki, seriously, be careful.....!"

Akiyoshi headed to the park without a word, walking quickly. Tougo had no choice but to walk along next to him.

"Don't worry, Tsubaki, I'll protect you."

"Speaking of which, Suzuki told me to be careful of *you*....."

The rain that fell until noon had stopped, and the milky-white evening fog started to arise.

Students split into small groups once they went down the street in front of the school. Uniformed figures could no longer be seen. Akiyoshi restlessly messed with the position of his mask. Seeming to have come to a decision, Akiyoshi questioned him.

"Tsubaki, you haven't been sleeping well lately, have you?"

".....huh, do I really look that ill?"

"You're pale.....more than yesterday, and the day before, something seems to be weighing on your mind."

Everyone was unusually concerned about him today. No matter how little sleep he got, he didn't think it was enough to so easily catch people's attention. When he answered he had a recurring bad dream today, Akiyoshi made a grim face.

"About fox mask?"

".....it has nothing to do with you, Akky."

Akiyoshi didn't respond after that. They walked for a while without a word. They stopped at a crosswalk as a bus passed in front of them. If he didn't think about anything, it was a typical evening. Akiyoshi who started to walk after waiting for the streetlight to change, opened his mouth as he choose his words carefully, like he did earlier.

"You've been attacked by ayakashi since long ago, haven't you?"

"How did you.....?"

"Don't underestimate my family's intelligence networks. I'd know at least that."

Before he could immediately reply that wasn't normal, Akiyoshi turned to Tougo.

"That goes for fox mask as well. Don't let your guard down."

His advice overlapped. It was the same as what that man they met in front of the shrine had told him. Tougo didn't intend on letting his guard down around Yue at all. He'd always be cautious around him. It may not have seemed that way to an outsider.

".....that guy, is similar."

Akiyoshi didn't seem to hear him, so he asked him to repeat what he said. Even though he had an understanding of mysterious existences, he hadn't shared the same experiences as him. Empathizing with him may be difficult. Tougo corrected his statement.

"I know at least that he's suspicious, and someone we know nothing about. But, I want to know *what* he is, and why he showed up in front of us."

Tougo wasn't concerned because he wanted to be. However, since he was deeply involved with him now, he would have no way to escape unless they resolved things. Perhaps because it was rare for Tougo to expose his feelings without hiding anything, Akiyoshi's eyes behind his glasses widened all of a sudden. After a brief pause, he agreed with him. Tougo took a short, deep breath to regained his calm.

"Certainly. My goal is to expose that guy's true nature to the end."

"Well, I think you're clearly way too suspicious of him, Akky."

He felt a little better changing the subject with a joke.

"It's being careless that's most dangerous. How can you be so defenseless around that guy?"

".....I'm not really going to let my guard down or anything. You're just as suspicious as that guy to me though."

"I don't know what you mean by that."

Akiyoshi had a serious face. He didn't get his joke, but that was probably why people treated him as odd. Tougo had a feeling his eccentricities would end up helping him.

"Haha, of course not. Hwah.....let's hurry up and solve this."

He smiled with feigned energy as he held back a yawn. All Tougo could do for now was pray his sleepless days would end.

They arrived at the park as they were talking. Yue and Kurogitsune didn't seem to be there yet. They may not come today because of yesterday's events. When he looked at his watch, it was still about ten minutes before they had promised to meet. Unsure which it was, the two of them started to walk toward the jungle gym. Time went by slowly just sitting idly. Not having much to talk about, their conversation had temporarily paused, and went on in silence. Tougo scolded himself for letting his mind wander, indulging in his thoughts before speaking to Akiyoshi.

"Akky, why are you so focused on that guy?"

"Ayakashi take humans away. As you know, by spiriting them away. There have been several people in this town taken away by them in that manner. I need to stop them. I just....."

"Just?"

“Never mind.....let’s end it there.”

Akiyoshi’s expression darkened. Tougo realized for the first time that even someone like Akiyoshi, who seemed to only pursue things he had an interest in, had their own circumstances. Since he was the same, he didn’t plan on asking him incessantly about it, but that surprising realization pulled on Tougo’s curiosity quite a bit.

“Are you doing this for the sake of the town, Akky?”

“.....that’s natural for members of the Tsuchika family.....but that’s not the only reason.”

Akiyoshi pushed up his glasses, averting his gaze. He was sitting at the highest spot on the jungle gym, about a head higher than Tougo, looking across the park. The rays of the setting sun between the intervals of the clouds shone orange against Akiyoshi’s cheeks.

“Hmmm.....”

He didn’t encourage the conversation, but he had a feeling he could talk about that at least.

“What are you planning on doing once you know that guy’s true intentions?”

“For now, I don’t know yet, but.....I assume one day I would eliminate him. In order for there to be no more sacrifices like you.”

His argument was simple. The thought that if there was something bringing harm to people should be eradicated may not have been wrong.

“Don’t talk about people like they’re already dead.”

Tougo laughed, still unable to agree with him. He definitely didn’t think things would be solved so easily.

“! They’re coming. Let’s stop this conversation.”

Standing up with force, Akiyoshi lost his balance from that spot, and jumped off from the top of the jungle gym. His mantle fluttered behind him when he landed.

“Akiyoshi, hello~”

Yue waved his hand from the park entrance. Kurogitsune on his shoulder waved his tail as usual.

“You guys are late!”

“Hey, hey, Akiyoshi, you fell just now, didn’t you? I saw~”

Akiyoshi got offended by Kurogitsune’s teasing. His cheeks turned red making him easy to figure out.

“I just got tired of waiting for you guys! More importantly, fox mask, you were late, once again you’ve made us put up with your irresponsibility. So, spit it out the truth already!”

Being the target of his attack as usual, Yue lazily evaded him, and escaped behind with lively clacking footsteps.

“Huuuh. You’re talking about stuff I don’t understand again, Akiyoshi.”

“Or could it be you’ve already abducted someone else? If so.....”

“Jeez, you’re so annoying, Akiyoshi. I totally came when we promised.”

“You’re the annoying one! Hurry up and confess!”

“Aah, jeez. You’ve made me mad, so I’m going to steal your tissues.”

As soon as they started their usual arguments, Yue glanced at the tissue box Akiyoshi was holding at his side before stealing it. Yue suddenly ran away at lightning speed, and Akiyoshi chased after him as fast as he could.

“Wha! Hey, wait, fox mask!”

“Those guys never get tired of this, huh.....”

Tougo watched from behind them, half impressed. From a distance, it just looked like they were fooling around. Kurogitsune instigated both sides from Yue’s shoulder.

“Ahaha, over here, over here~!”

“Hey, wait! Wait—!! I’ll referee!”

“Hey, Yue! Nice~ run, run away!”

“Y-You’re going outside the park.....? What are you, a kid?”

When he looked toward the two of them messing around, Tougo watched them annoyed, but amused. It was a park in the middle of a residential area, but it was big. They got smaller and smaller until they were hidden by the shadows of the playground equipment.

“Was it just my imagination.....? I can’t really tell if they’re similar or not anymore.”

Yue who was playing tag with Akiyoshi wasn’t similar to the Yoshiki in his memories. Could it be settled with it just being his imagination? Their masks that weren’t exactly the same, and the other several coincidences, confused Tougo though.

“Yoshiki, just where did you take her.....”

He hadn’t seen him even once since the night Akane disappeared. At the same time, the amount of monsters that attacked Tougo decreased. Yoshiki never showed himself unless Tougo was in danger. So it was natural that if he wasn’t being attacked, he wouldn’t see him. But...Tougo was certain, without any basis, Yoshiki would never appear before him again.

—*I’ll protect you.*

“.....liar.”

He was certainly unable to keep his promise. Yue and Akiyoshi were goofing around as usual. Tougo was starting to feel like he had been deceived by Akiyoshi’s sudden change to anything but serious. They were talking about something, but he couldn’t hear them because of the distance. It was a good thing there were no kids around, they ran through the sand box, and past the swings, with their rather involved game of tag. At that point, they had gone past the fence outside of the park.

“They have a lot of time on their hands.”

He had a feeling their conversation wouldn’t progress today either. He sighed as he started to come down from the jungle gym, but at that moment, he saw something at his feet.

“.....!”

Chills ran through his body. He felt as though there were goose bumps on his skin, and his hair was standing on end. Something was crawling toward him as it let out a moan. It was something like a shadow, but clearly much darker. It was that creature he was familiar with from before. Its gaping, vacant eyes were looking at Tougo. He couldn't read its expression—he wasn't sure if it had a body. Its mouth squirmed.

—.....o...o...d

—fo...o.....d

Stunned, Tougo was frozen in place, when their eyes met its face distorted into a smile. Actually, it wasn't a smile, but he could tell it was laughing. It expressed the joy of finding its meal through its body. With its chicken leg-like arms, it awkwardly grasped the narrow jungle gym, and lifted itself up.

"It's been a while, hasn't it."

He slipped from the jungle gym he was grasping because of the sweat on his hands. Even though he had encountered these things several times before, he was paralyzed with fear. This monster was bigger, and darker than any of the others he had seen up until now. He didn't think it looked any different, but its mouth was huge, and the emptiness of its eyes were much too deep. Tougo was unable to move. The darkness of its restless body responded joyously. It climbed the jungle gym with its chicken arms, drawing closer to Tougo. Akiyoshi had told him he was predisposed to not forgetting the people the people who had been spirited away. If that was the case, did that mean he was also predisposed to this? Predisposed to attracting monsters. Was something that absurd possible?

"Damn it!"

He cursed himself as he climbed to the top of the jungle gym for the time being. It was where Akiyoshi was sitting earlier. He was somehow able to move with his shaking fists and knees. The monster's sudden movement stopped Tougo for a moment, but he immediately pulled himself together and started to climb the jungle gym. Thankfully for him, it wasn't all that agile.

—/...want to eat.....a...three...star...

".....kh."

Being told straight out that it wanted to eat him was more disturbing than he could have imagined. A cold sweat fell from his forehead onto his shoulders. When he could climb no further, he looked around his surroundings. He couldn't deny he held some faint expectations. His hope immediately turned into regret. There was no one anywhere in the park that could save Tougo.

Of course.

Tougo regretted his own optimism. He saw Yue and Akiyoshi running in the distance. Tougo didn't call out for help. He needed to do this on his own somehow. He needed to run away on his own, without relying on anyone else, or asking for help, for the rest of his life. Once he made that decision, he tried to jump down from the jungle gym on the opposite side the monster was climbing up. But...

"!?"

It should have been coming at him from behind, but it was right in front of him. It was as if it were trying to catch Tougo inside of his mouth when he jumped down.

—Fe...as...t

He immediately stopped and swung the bag he was holding as hard as he could. Along with a heavy resistance

against his bag, the monster fell. During that moment, Tougo jumped to the ground and ran. His leather shoes slipped on the park dirt. He almost tripped several times. Perhaps because its prey had gotten away once, it chased after Tougo with a speed slightly faster than before. Its chicken legs increased from five to six. Its shape was like the surface of choppy water.

—I'll protect you

The words that revived in his ears were already like a curse to Tougo. He passed the sand box, dashed by the swings, and heard Yue yell once he turned at the clock by the park entrance. Akiyoshi was running toward him with the other two.

"Tsubaki!"

Yue shouted as soon as he put himself between the monster and Tougo. Continuing at its same momentum, one of its thin arms cut through the air and wrapped around Yue's leg. Its jointless, willow branch-like hand twisted around while it still grasped his thin ankle. Yue reflexively cried out when he was pulled down.

".....kh!"

"Yue!"

"Tsubaki! Run!"

He yelled out to Tougo who had turned around. It was such a sharp voice he normally wouldn't have expected it come from Yue as he ripped the monster's arm off of him. The shadow seemed confused by the unexpected counterattack. With its gaze still fixed on Tougo, Yue thwarted its movement.

—Don't...get...in.....my way

".....that's my line."

He said as he stood up slowly.

"You can't eat whatever you feel like.....right?"

His tone was clear and gentle, but it sounded surprisingly cruel. Tougo watched him as he continued to stand there completely still.

"Good bye."

A pillar of fire the color of the sunset rose up with a roar. It illuminated Yue's pale cheeks brilliantly. Even Akiyoshi who rushed up to him was dumbfounded. The flames suddenly died down without any heat. In the blink of an eye, the monster's body dispersed and disappeared. Nothing was left, almost to the point that made him wonder if it was all just an illusion. All that remained was the hoarse dying wails reverberating in his ears, but even that eventually faded.

".....you."

"I'm sorry you had to go through something so dangerous, Tsubaki."

Yue turned around and smiled as if nothing had happened. He had a feeling that his troubled expression with his brows knit really was similar to the Yoshiki within his memories.

"But.....I'll protect you.....from here on out."

“.....you, really are...”

Akiyoshi spoke as if to drown out Tougo’s mutter. Still dumbfounded, his voice sounded like he was searching for his words, with its usual lack of tact.

“An ayakashi defeated an ayakashi?”

“Hey, look. You get it now, right? This guy isn’t the culprit.”

Kurogitsune had moved to Akiyoshi’s shoulder at some point, sticking his chest out triumphantly, but Akiyoshi refused.

“.....don’t be stupid. You probably just sacrificed one of your companions to fake your innocence.”

“Huh!? What are you talking about? Isn’t your brain going to melt with all that suspicion!?”

“Don’t think you can fool me so easily, small creature. You stole my tissues to draw me away from Tsubaki, then used that opportunity to have that thing attack him.”

“.....why would we do something so complicated!? Besides, this guy isn’t clever enough to come up with a plan like that.”

“Then it was your idea. You tricked your brethren to gain Tsubaki’s trust. Your cowardice is rather extreme.”

“Daaah!”

Kurogitsune was the first one to raise his voice in their dispute.

“We don’t even know when those akujiki will show up, there’s no way we would do something that stupid!”

“.....akujiki? What’s that?”

Seizing a new keyword, Akiyoshi pushed up his glasses as he glared at Kurogitsune.

“Obviously those gluttonous guys who will make a meal of anyone!”

“.....ooh? Why don’t you give us the deals?”

As soon as he finished speaking, and realized his slip of the tongue, Kurogitsune jumped off his shoulder to try to run away, but Akiyoshi grabbed his tail.

“.....aaah.....damn it, you set me up.....I’ll just tell you this, we don’t know much about them either! Right, Yue.....Yue?”

He turned to Yue to get confirmation, but unable to stand, he was still on his knees. His ankle was covered in dark red.

“.....uwh.”

There was a wound wrapping around his ankle twice like a snake from the hand of the monster he had protected Tougo from. The wound looked like a rug burn. It wasn’t deep, but the skin was scrapped and covered in flowing blood.

“Hey, are you all right!?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s not as deep as it looks.”

Yue smiled with a strained face at Kurogitsune who was panicking.

“That’s from when you were protecting me…….”

“Heh heh. I shouldn’t do things I’m not used to. I’m hungry all of a sudden, and can’t gather any strength…….”

Yue sat down on the ground, ignoring the guilt Tougo was holding onto.

“Don’t lay down there!!”

Kurogitsune looked up at the sky, seemingly just as worried.

“Anyway, let’s change locations. We’re going to stand out if we stay here, and his injuries need to be treated.”

Even though the monster was gone, being gathered there just made them stand out. Tougo suggested they go to his house. They all agreed. Akiyoshi let out an exaggerated sigh as he lent Yue his shoulder.

“Guess I have no choice.”

“Huh!? You’re going to do it, Akiyoshi?”

Yue seemed pleasantly surprised.

“It would be troublesome if you ran away.”

“Huuuh……jeez, trust me already.”

Akiyoshi with Kurogitsune on his shoulder, supported Yue who despite being exhausted was rather talkative as the whole group started to walk. Tougo walked a step behind them.

“Hey, you’re fine now.”

Tougo finished wrapping the bandage and put a stopper on it before tapping Yue’s left leg. Yue thanked him as he stared curiously at the pure white cloth wrapped around his ankle. His living room wasn’t very spacious, but the three people and a fox in the room made it feel even more cramped. Today was the day Yaichi picked up Hina, but the two of them had yet to come home.

“You’re really good at this, Tsubaki.”

Since his voice was beyond amazed, and way too happy, Tougo made sure to replay as quick as possible.

“Anyone could do this sort of thing.”

“Really? I feel like it would take everyone at my place much longer. Right, Kurogitsune?”

Kurogitsune skillfully crossed his front legs and agreed.

“Then the guys around you are just bad it. So?”

“Huh?”

“You’re hungry, right? What do you want to eat?”

Tougo stood up carrying the first aid kit and put it away in the medicine cabinet in the room next door.

"You're going to make something?"

"I have to prepare dinner anyway, so it's fine."

"You're amazing, Tougo, you can cook!?"

"Why does it feel like you're actually insulting me."

Kurogitsune jumped on top of the low table, but Yue scolded him so he returned to the cushion. Kurogitsune requested takoyaki, but since it wasn't on his dinner menu, he refused. Based on Tougo's suggestion, and taking into account the stock in his refrigerator, they decided on karaage in the end.

"Well, I'm going to cook, so behave while you wait. No games of tag or whatever."

"Yes. We have a temporary truce while we're here."

"You're like a mom, Tsubaki."

"I'm not happy about that."

Yue apologized quietly at his curt reply. Tougo headed to the kitchen. He moistened the cutting board and started his cooking preparations as he listened to Yue and Akiyoshi's conversation behind him. Their voices were quieted, but the house was small and he wasn't that far. Akiyoshi's consideration was in vain.

"Now then, tell me, your true nature and your intentions."

He banged on the table, making the contents of his tea cup shake. Akiyoshi's eyes glaring at Yue were full of determination to not let him escape.

"My intentions are to get along with you, and Tsubaki."

"I'm already tired of hearing that. So, you called that black thing.....an akujiki, right? What was that? One of your companions?"

Akiyoshi interrupted the end of Yue's words, throwing him off. This was the first time Tougo had found out that those monsters were called akujiki.

"No! Those guys will eat anything indiscriminately. If someone is eaten by one of those guys, their existence will be forgotten.....like what you guys were talking about, like being spirited away."

"Their existence.....like the principal's case, huh."

"That's right. They're clumsy, so instead of them being forgotten all at once, they're gradually forgotten. Get it now, masked four-eyes."

He peeked at Kurogitsune who was fed up of Akiyoshi's relentless suspicions. Akiyoshi's stubbornness surpassed even Tougo's expectations. Yue was next to him peacefully sipping his tea.

"So that thing is different from your companions?"

"That's right. They're a pain, messing up the town. We're the victims here too."

Dodging Akiyoshi's questions, Kurogitsune ran away from the cushion and complained from on top of Yue's lap. Yue moved his tea cup out of the way. The way they were all moving around so energetically he was able to mostly distinguish their voices and movements behind him without turning around. *They're so lively*, Tougo thought as he threw chicken into the hot oil. The coated meat in the golden oil made a crackling sound. The bubbles rising from

the bottom of pot disrupted the level surface as it become turbulent.

“Then what are you guys? A different species of ayakashi?”

“.....I.....I’ve lived in Utsuwa Mountain since long ago. This guy, Yue, is different.”

“Kurogitsune.”

Yue chided Kurogitsune at his words. Tougo had no way of determining what parts of their secrets were true, or fabricated. Between the sounds of frying, the conversation in the living room continued.

“It’s true. This guy has his own reason for living at the shrine. He’s gone out into the town to study human society. That way he can live in the same world as you guys one day.”

“He used some unusual powers though.”

Akiyoshi voiced Tougo’s doubts.

“That wasn’t me. I just borrowed that power.”

“.....so you’re conspiring with ayakashi?”

“My goal is to become friends with you two.”

“How many times have I told you that’s what’s so suspicious.....”

In the end, their conversation came full circle. As Tougo listened to their endless back and forth, he served the karaage on a platter, and moved some pre-made sides to small bowls and carried it out.

“It’s ready.”

He served tofu and wakegi miso soup into five soup bowls, an amount he rarely used. Luckily there was enough white rice left to set aside in the rice cooker for Hina’s lunch tomorrow. All of them momentarily stopped their quarreling to look at the steaming food with sparkling eyes.

“—Amazing, Tougo!! Karaage!?”

“It is unmistakably and utterly karaage, huh.....”

Both Kurogitsune who had just admitted himself he was an ayakashi, and Akiyoshi who was especially ordinary, let out words of admiration. The smell of food wafting through the room calmed the tense air all at once, Tougo let out a sigh. It was certain that Akiyoshi’s suspicions overlapped with his, but just continuing on the way they were was also certainly suffocating him. Not to mention Yue was injured, and Tougo was partly responsible for that injury. It wasn’t like he thought he *didn’t* want to spend at least today peacefully.

“It’s just like Ranchuu’s cooking~”

Yue turned to Kurogitsune for some reason, and smiled, oblivious to Tougo’s concern.

“Is there any other kind of karaage?”

“I’ve only eaten my meals at the shrine, so I’m excited~”

He watched Kurogitsune who was looking at the food hungrily, while he voiced the doubts that came to his mind.

“By the way, are foxes okay eating fried food?”

"Idiot, when talking about foxes, you think fried tofu, right!? Obviously fried things are our favorite!"

"What sort of logic is that?"

While he wanted to think about Kurogitsune's logic that he so confidently rebutted, he decided not to press further. He was starting to realize their pointless argument would just go on endlessly. Tougo handed out chopsticks to everyone, and the all put their hands together.

"Thanks for the food."

"Before that, Akky, shouldn't you call home? You have a curfew, right?"

".....y-yeah. Thank you for reminding me."

"Old families sure are strict, huh. If I have to, I'll put in a good word for you too."

".....what.....?"

When he showed him to their home phone in the entranceway, Akiyoshi was trembling. Thinking he did something wrong he stopped, but when he turned around he saw his friend choking back tears of joy.

"Tsubaki.....you're such a good guy....."

Stop being so surprised by every little thing I do, Tougo resisted saying out loud. It was pointless to even say anything, since he always seemed to surprise him somehow.

In the end, Akiyoshi wasn't allowed to break curfew, so it was only Yue, Kurogitsune, and Tougo around the dining table. Later Yaiichi and Hina would join them when they got home. Akiyoshi opposed repeatedly into the phone receiver, but his father stubbornly wouldn't give in. It was a strictness Tougo was unfamiliar with since he was basically allowed to come and go as he pleased. He promised to make him something next time, but he still reluctantly left in the car that came to pick him up. Being picked up by a car was another thing that seemed like he was from a whole other world from Tougo. Replacing Akiyoshi was Yaiichi and Hina returning home. The moment he closed the front door, he greeted the two of them, and roughly explained the situation. Hina who loved karaage raised both her hands in joy. Since it was a rare occurrence for Tougo to bring home friends, Yaiichi gladly welcomed them. As soon as he left the hallway and stood in the living room though, his usually gentle face lost its color. It was only for a moment. It was the moment that Yaiichi had started to speak, and Yue turned around to greet him.

"—Yoshiki...san?"

His voice sounded dazed. He normally seemed able to hide it well, but his voice seemed to leak some of his true self. It shook Tougo intensely.

"Dad?"

"Ah, never mind. Good evening....."

Yaiichi pretended to be the same as usual, and faced Yue with a smile. Yue also greeted him politely and exchanged a few words of idle chatter. Hina broke the silence that fell when the conversation cut off, afterwards it became a boisterous evening meal. Yue and Hina who were already acquainted with each other immediately let loose, making a ruckus as they opened up picture books and played video games. Even Yaiichi who would normally be in the next room at his writing desk, remained in the living room to join them. Tougo remembered something as he cleaned up the tableware. His father had certainly said Yoshiki. There was no way Tougo could know all of his father's limited personal relationships. The name his father mentioned may have been a different "Yoshiki". However, Tougo didn't

think that was possible. He had definitely seen the same person that he saw in Yue. He was certain of that. How did his father know Yoshiki?

“!”

There was a loud shattering sound, he had dropped a tea cup in the sink. The sound brought him back to his senses. Indulging in his reveries, his hands had become careless.

“.....damn it.”

He had no choice but to pick up the shards of the tea cup that had fallen into the wash bin. He picked up the larger pieces inside of the clear water, trying not to cut his hand, and let the rest wash away with the water. He put them in a plastic bag as he let out a sigh. Luckily, he had already finished the rest of his dishes. The broken tea cup was the one Akane used. Yaichi wouldn't throw it away and it was sometimes used for guests. It was already old, so it wasn't unnatural for it to break. Even so, Tougo felt a loneliness in his chest breaking something his mother had left behind.

“Tsubaki.”

“.....what?”

He unintentionally snapped. He was aware of his venting. There was still a video game match unfolding behind him. Every once in a while loud cheers arose. Withdrawing from all that, Yue came to Tougo.

“Thank you for today. And thanks for the food.”

“I don't think it's anything you need to thank me for, but you're welcome.”

“Yeah. It was really yummy. This was my first time eating out, but I thought it was nice that it was meal you made, Tsubaki. It made me feel kind of warm, and happy.”

Not usually used to being praised, Tougo wasn't sure how to respond.

“Too bad about Akiyoshi though.”

“Yeah. Well, you guys will just have to come again.”

“.....again, huh. Right, that's true.”

Yue nodded his head repeatedly, seeming unusually agreeable. He simply looked happy to have more plans for the future. After nodding for a while, Yue opened his mouth again.

“Um, sorry, I don't eat very much.”

“.....it's fine, don't worry about it. You don't need to force yourself to eat.”

He certainly didn't eat much for his age. Perhaps feeling guilty about leaving behind some of what he had been served, Yue apologized hesitantly. It made Tougo happy.

“Will you cook for me again?”

“Yeah. If you're okay with my cooking, I'll make you whatever you want.”

He didn't necessarily try to improve his skills, but having his cooking praised simply made him happy. Being told they would want to eat his food again was more than enough for the cook.

“Heh heh.....thanks.”

However, opposite of how Tougo felt, Yue's face darkened.

"But.....what I really need to eat is....."

"?"

"Nothing, never mind."

He shook his lowered head, but as soon as he lifted his face. Yue was back to his usual self. He heard Hina laugh especially loud from the living room. Kurogitsune shouted something from on top of the TV. Kurogitsune was getting angry at Yaiichi's poor video game skills. The music indicating game over played before it returned to the start screen once again. *All right, I'll get it this time*, Yaiichi exclaimed enthusiastically, but the two of them burst into laughter. It was like they were a proper family, Tougo thought. It was like he had proper family, and a normal, natural life. That thought only furthered Tougo's pain.

"Hey, you."

Making up his mind, Tougo opened his mouth. He felt like he could now ask.....what he always wanted to know. Luckily, there was no one paying attention to their conversation.

"What?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, but.....what's wrong, Tsubaki?"

Tougo questioned Yue who seemed puzzled by the serious atmosphere.

".....do you know a Yoshiki Sakura?"

".....huh?"

Trying to understand what Tougo meant, Yue looked back at him. His pale, thin hair rest against his cheeks. Tougo looked at the fox mask with its smiling mouth Yue was wearing.

"I've been wondering about that since before. I don't really care who you are, or where you come from right now. But....."

It was a lie that he wasn't interested in Yue's birth place, or intentions. However, that was what Tougo wanted to know above all else.

"The way you look, the way you talk.....is way too similar to that guy. Hey, you know Yoshiki Sakura, don't you?"

Yue's eyes widened for a moment. He had probably never seen Tougo so desperate. Even deep down inside, Tougo was also surprised by his own desperation. As soon as he spoke, his feelings just welled up even more.

I've been looking for him, he added on.

"Earlier, your dad called me by that name too."

When he pointed out Yaiichi's response from earlier, Tougo was at a loss for words. Unaware of that, Yue continued with a question.

"Is that Yoshiki person someone important to you, Tsubaki?"

"He's not important to me."

Tougo immediately replied. Yue seemed to be surprised by how quick he responded, or maybe by his harsh tone.

He wasn't important to me, it wasn't like that.

Tougo repeated, as if to convince even himself. He wasn't important to him, but he...probably...didn't hate him, because there was no way he could forget the distinct fear he felt when he was young.

"Sorry, I....."

"Well, if you don't know him, it's fine."

He was the person who saved Tougo from the monster attacking him in the park at dusk, the same as today. If he hadn't been there at that time, Tougo would have been eaten. If Kurogitsune's explanation was true, then he may not have remained in anyone's memory either. He had promised to protect Tougo with the same words as Yue, so he couldn't hate that person, but he couldn't forgive him either.

"That guy.....Yoshiki, is the man who ran away with my mother."

With his chest filled with nothing but misery, Tougo was assaulted with a terrible headache.

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

 frillyfujoshitranslations.tumblr.com/post/136898553372/akaya-akashiya-ayakashino-kagekui-machi-no

Chapter 6 Rippling Darkness

Past midnight, the town was sleeping in darkness. The stars sparkled in the clear winter sky. Half an hour later, clouds came into view, muddying the sky here and there with gray. A dog barked lazily in the distance from someone's yard. Perhaps it was worked up by a disturbance in the night, or maybe it was lonely. A middle-aged man ran down the street along a stone wall. His unsteady breathing implied his extreme urgency. His footsteps were in disorder, his upper body leaning forward in his hurry. He was wearing a suit under his coat with matching slacks and leather shoes. He must have been coming home from work. With every step, the neck-tie at his chest would flutter. He looked behind his shoulder over and over as he ran away. He collapsed against the chain link fence opposite of the stone wall. The bag he somehow managed to hold on to fell to the ground with a dull sound.

"Haa, haa, haa.....this should be far enough....."

He pressed against the pain in his side as he caught his breath. He must have lost whatever was chasing him. Thinking he had run far enough he relaxed, but the man suddenly froze.

".....ah."

There was a shadow approaching in front of him. The shadow looked like it was even darker than the darkness of the night it emerged from.

"Ah....."

He tried to back away, but because of the chain link fence against his back, he was unable to move even a single step. Even so, the rusted fence creaked when it received the man's movements.

".....fo...o...d....."

He could barely catch the words it spurted out with a sigh.

"D-Don't come near me, monster!"

The shadow he called a monster smiled widely at his almost laughable scream. It drew closer until it was right before his eyes.

"F.....o.....o.....d....."

"Hee.....!"

It came close enough to fill the man's vision with its empty eyes, knocking his bag away with its withered branch-like arm. It opened its mouth, but when it tried to swallow his head shaking with fear, its movements stopped. It stopped, with its mouth still open joyously. When he looked down, it had been completely cut in two where, if it were a human, would be its abdomen area. Something like darkness, or maybe shadows spurt out from the opening of the cut, eventually it disappeared from its head to its torso.

"I was.....saved.....?"

He hesitantly released the tension all through his body. The dog stopped barking, and the wind died down. It didn't seem like a monster had attacked a human that night at all.

“Yo.”

When he lifted his face, there was a young man in a black coat standing before his eyes.

“Uum.....did you save me?”

“There’s a ton of them tonight. They just keep showing up one after the other.”

Without answering his question, the young man swung the pole up in his hand once in an annoyed mood.

“Showing up...you mean that thing from before.....?”

“Hm? Aah, what a pain.”

He had a somewhat wild atmosphere, and he wouldn’t engage in conversation. Deciding he should leave right away, the man picked up the bag he dropped, but as soon as he did, the young man in the coat thrust his pole toward his throat.

“Huh, w-what.....?”

“You’re lost too, huh.”

“Huh.....?”

The young man responded to his flustered confusion with a cruel smile.

“Hey, why don’t I send you home?”

“No, I can go home on my own—“

Without waiting for him to finish telling him it would be all right, his pole cut through the air. There wasn’t even enough time for him to scream. With a sharp sound of the wind being cut, all that remained afterwards was a bag.

“—Aah.....I’m hungry.”

The young man—Sagano muttered his words that betrayed his actions. He shook his sullied pole several times then held it up right again. He clicked his tongue. He couldn’t stomach it. Seeing Utsuwa after such a long time only rubbed him the wrong way. There was the large amount of akujiki, and that boy with the name Tsubaki. If he didn’t have this borrowed form, he wouldn’t even have been able to walk around like this. Another reason for his foul mood was Utsuwa didn’t look much different from long ago.

“.....hm?”

He suddenly sensed presences closing in on him from behind. It was a pair of young men. They looked around the same age as him, or perhaps they were younger. They carried umbrellas even though it wasn’t raining, and were wearing well-tailored coats that looked rather heavy.

“Good evening, *imposter-kun*.”

“.....we finally found you.”

They each boldly stated whatever they felt like.

“Hmmm, he really does look just like him. There’s no way it’s actually him though.”

Without waiting for Sagano to reply, the young man behind the frivolous-looking one continued.

“There’s no way. What are you? Why do you look like that?”

The young man with the straight dark gray hair framing his forehead asked with a disgusted, harsh tone. The eyes behind his round glasses were threatening. Opposite from him, the frivolous one was wearing a hat over his light brown hair, and had a large bag at his side. Sagano knew the two of them weren’t human. He knew their faces from long ago. However, he didn’t have a friendly relationship with either of them. The pair didn’t seem to realize who Sagano was. It was obvious by the way they angrily questioned who he was.

“Stop your noisy peeping, you crow-underlings. I don’t look like this because I want to.”

Their expressions warped into anger when he mentioned his appearance.

“Then why do you look like that?”

“It happened to be on hand.....that’s why I’ve come to get it back.”

Sagano smiled as if to confuse them further. Probably not understanding what he meant, the pair became even more agitated. It was natural they wouldn’t understand what Sagano truly meant, but he didn’t mind. He didn’t really want them to understand.

“We don’t have time to crack your riddles. Stop talking about things we don’t understand.”

“Then hurry home and ask your precious princess.”

“That princess is the one relying on us~”

The frivolous one said amused, retorting back to him rudely as he tapped the closed umbrella against his shoulder.

“Let’s just capture him for now.”

The sharp-looking one said giving up as he readied his umbrella. He then jumped towards him. The soles of his boots scraping against the asphalt made an unpleasant sound. The umbrella cut the air next to him, trying to mow him down, but Sagano swung his pole to stop the blow.

“Oh my. It doesn’t look like he’s going to let us escort him that easily, Kagecchan.”

He had a nonchalant and insolent voice. No matter how much the umbrella that was stronger than it looked clashed with Sagano’s pole, it didn’t break. His opponents momentarily withdrew two or three steps.

“But that’s what we came here to do!”

He thrust toward the frivolous one annoyed as he took on the two of them. Before they could come any closer, he swung his pole, grazing the tips of their noses before they lost their balances trying to dodge it. He used that opportunity to thrust the pole between them. He kicked away the tip of the frivolous one’s umbrella that came towards him. Opening up more of a distance between the two of them, Sagano would pursue them no further.

“Wait!”

They called out for him to stop when he tried to leave.

“Thanks for going out of your way to invite me.....but I don’t really feel like it right now. See you later.”

The two of them furrowed their brows again. Sagano scoffed at the pair before turning on his heel. He would have been fine obediently accepting their invitation, but there were still things he needed to do. There were those kids he

saw at the base of the shrine the night before. Sagano's target was the one *inside* of that child called Yue. That should have been his only business. However, he saw someone he was unusually interested in at the same place. That child from the *Tsubaki* family. He didn't know why he warned him to be careful on a whim. If those two were together, he would certainly be carried away to a place he had no interest in. The wind blew by strongly. That troublesome pair would probably show up in front of Sagano again eventually. He didn't have time deal with them. He didn't have much time left at all.

The sky was buried in grey, the moon wasn't visible. From an elevated area outside of town, Sagano looked down at the roofs of the houses, and laughed faintly. It would just be a little longer until he was able to *continue*. It was different from Sagano's true wish. Even so, that was a part of it.

"Soon."

When he whispered to no one in particular, the shadows covering the night sky trembled, agreeing with him. They rippled around the area, then eventually fell silent.

"Akane!"

The rays of the setting sun at dusk made the living room a bright orange. It was that time of day when it was too bright to turn on a light, but too dark to read fine-print. Tougo came home, put away his backpack in his room, and made his way to his mother. On top of the low table in the middle of the room were traces she had been writing a letter. There was scattered stationery, a pencil, and a pen. However, there was no evidence any of them had been used at all, so he guessed they had been left there for a few hours.

"Akane!"

".....huh?"

After calling to her several times, Akane finally noticed Tougo's voice, and turned around.

"Aah, Tougo.....welcome home."

Tougo who had called her name repeatedly until then was at a loss when she smiled softly at him.

".....uum, I'm home."

"Yes, welcome back. How was school? Was it fun?"

"Not really....."

"Did something bad happen?"

Tougo looked away, staying quiet as he looked at the pen on top of the low table.

".....Akane."

"What is it?"

"You've been acting weird lately."

"What do you mean?"

Akane smiled at the words he managed to squeeze out with his head still lowered.

"Akane, lately you haven't really been noticing when I call you. You're always in a daze. You also haven't been here when I come home from school."

"Mommy had things to do."

".....but, you're here all of a sudden."

".....that's right. That must mean you were mistaken, Tougo."

The words Akane answered as she continued to smile felt empty to Tougo. It must have been plans, and for reasons children wouldn't understand. He understood that of course. Even so, Akane's irregularities were serious to Tougo. On top of the desk she seemed to be writing a letter on was a red pinwheel right next to the envelope. It was the one given to her by the man in the fox mask the day of the festival. Without a single word of explanation, the young man in the fox mask handed it to Akane. Ever since that day, Akane had treasured it.

"Hey, that's the one.....Yoshiki gave you, isn't it?"

".....that's right."

He thought she would deny it again, but Akane confirmed Tougo's question.

"You know Yoshiki?"

He wanted to know. But he was afraid to ask. Both thoughts had come and gone from Tougo's head, but in the end, he made up his mind to ask.

".....that's right. That person is someone important to me."

"Important?"

Akane nodded her head silently.

"I've told you before that I don't have a mom or dad.....your grandmother and grandfather, right? It's been quite a while now though."

"Yeah."

Tougo was used to not having grandparents. It was typical for kids his same age to have a grandfather and grandmother, but Tougo was raised to think not having them was typical. That's why he never felt doubtful or upset about it. Akane's eyes wandered away, as if she was recalling the distant past.

"It had been a while since my mom disappeared, but it was probably a few years after that.....after a while, Yoshiki also disappeared."

"This happened before I was born.....?"

"Yes. Waaay before. No matter where I looked, I never thought I would find him.....until now."

Akane's mouth formed into a smile when she spoke. Her gentle, narrowed eyes softly hazed under her thick lashes. Tougo thought she looked just like a little girl. He felt as though the one in front of him wasn't his mother anymore.

"I've been looking for him for so, so long."

"So, is he more important to you than dad?"

".....I wonder. It's not something you can weigh on a scale or anything."

“.....”

She didn't answer any more questions, nor did he ask any more. His chest tightened when he got the feeling she had implicitly admitted she was betraying Yaiichi. Looking back, Tougo was still a child after all. Akane started to hum quietly. He took that to mean the conversation was over. Unable to ask any more questions about the meaning behind her words, he looked out the window. Even the straggling foot traffic gradually decreased as dusk turned into night. He met Yoshiki a little before the day of the festival at the park. He had saved Tougo from that monster that attacked him. What did that man in the hyottoko mask say to him at that time?

—I'll protect you. For your father and mother's sake.

Of course Tougo didn't know what he meant by that either. He changed his lame, unflattering mask to a fox one, which meant he took Tougo's words to heart. Just that made him happy. He had planned on complimenting his fox mask the next time they met. He wondered what had changed though. All he could hear inside of the room was Akane's faint singing voice.

How many nights had passed in this way? Tougo rested his chin in his hand as he faced his study desk alone in his room. Ever since he met Yue that festival night, he would often indulge in his reveries like this. Being aware of that, Tougo was disgusted with himself.

“Akaya, akashiya.....”

Tougo couldn't forget Akane's favorite song. When he suddenly started singing it to himself, the melody surprisingly sank down heavily in his heart. Hina sang it, Akane sang it, why were they all so fascinated by it? That melody always followed alongside Tougo's anguish. It was like an inescapable cage.

“Tougo-kun?”

His sliding door opened hesitantly, and his father entered. Showing up at this hour, he must have had something he wanted to talk about, or something he was worried about.

“Are you all right not sleeping yet?”

Yaiichi wasn't scolding him, he was concerned, but it still annoyed him to no end.

“Yoshiki.”

Tougo muttered that name to see what would happen. He wanted to know what face his father would make.

“Huh?”

“That's what you called that guy when you saw him today, right? You said, Yoshiki.”

Just as he thought, Yaiichi was going to try to lie to him.

“You know Yoshiki, don't you?”

“.....yeah.”

Yaiichi responded with a voice like a sigh after a moment of silence.

“Yoshiki Sakura. That guy took Akane away seven years ago.”

Those words pained him. His heart beat painfully, and an uncomfortable sweat clung to the back of his neck. Even

though so many days and months had gone by, Tougo still was unable to free himself of the past. That felt the worst to him.

“But, you knew that.”

“.....yeah, sorry.”

He hesitated, perhaps out of concern for Tougo, but Yaiichi clearly confirmed his suspicions. His father’s kindness always got on Tougo’s nerves.

“Akane-chan never said a word, so I don’t know the particulars of why she disappeared, but.....”

Yaiichi continued after he took in a deep breath.

“Yoshiki-san was someone very important to me and Akane-chan.....especially to Akane-chan.”

“Even though he abandoned her long ago?”

Tougo couldn’t understand it at all. How could he be important to her if he left her behind?

“You knew about that?”

Yaiichi seemed surprised that Tougo knew. The Tsubaki family rarely talked about the past. Neither Yaiichi, nor Akane had many relatives, so they didn’t have anyone to talk to. Of course they wouldn’t have any cheerful stories from the past.

“I heard about it from Akane. I don’t know the details though.”

Yaiichi slowly began to speak. Yoshiki, Akane and Yaiichi each lost someone from their families when they were young, and became close during that time. Still at a young age, Yoshiki was taken in by Akane’s family, and Yaiichi was raised at his grandparent’s house. The only ones they could trust were each other.

“Still, we thought we could keep living like this as long as we had each other.”

We may have been wrong about that though, Yaiichi added, laughing bitterly at himself before continuing. Tougo didn’t respond, he just kept quiet. Eventually, after a few years, Yoshiki disappeared this time. It was during a stormy day. He seemed to disappear all of a sudden, leaving Akane behind. It was as if he had been swept away by the strong winds. No matter how hard they tried, Yoshiki was never found. There wasn’t much they could do. Yoshiki’s whereabouts were completely unknown. At that time, Yaiichi’s grandparents had passed away, so both he and Akane lived alone until she moved into his home, free of room and board, where they began living together. After some time, Yaiichi developed feelings for her, and in no time the two of them became a family both figuratively and officially.

“.....and then I was born?”

This was his first time hearing his parent’s story, but it felt like a made up tale about other people. It lacked a sense of reality.

“That’s right. The two of us were overjoyed.....”

We promised over and over we would raise you with all our love, Yaiichi told him shamelessly. It made Tougo feel somewhat uncomfortable.

“Despite all that, she abandoned you, didn’t she?”

"That's because I had you.if the one who took Akane-chan that festival night was Yoshiki, I can't blame him."

Did that mean he forgave her? Had he given up? It was a difficult to understand feeling. Perhaps able to read Tougo's expression, Yaiichi continued.

"I was just something like an extra from the start. Of course I loved Akane-chan, and never regretted marrying her, but.....she was never mine to begin with."

"So, that's why you gave her back to Yoshiki?"

Was this all because of his father's compassion? If compassion wasn't quite the right word, wasn't he just being forced to bear the responsibility of all this injustice? He didn't intend on supporting Yaiichi, but it was a story difficult to accept.

"What a selfish reason.....you just let her abandon us?"

"Tougo-kun, I don't believe people disappear like this out of selfishness, but because they want to protect those important to them."

"That's....."

That's ridiculous.

How was this someone's way of looking out for Yaiichi or Tougo? Tougo was speechless. There was no way he could accept Yaiichi's much too soft-hearted explanation. It was impossible for Tougo to lose the outlet for his pain and anger from being left behind. If vanishing without considering the hardships of those left behind was to "protect" them, it made him want to vomit.

"Well, I have nothing to base that on though."

He felt dizzy. Yaiichi ended their conversation with his frivolous words as Tougo continued to glare at the floor. He always told him not to stay up too late, but Yaiichi may have also had things that kept him up at night. The sliding door closed with a small sound, silence fell over the room. It looked like today was going to be another sleepless night.

Yue's chest felt like it was being crushed. Unable to sleep, he awoke. He blinked his eyes then looked around the room. The pendulum clock in his room pointed to eight o'clock in the morning. He could tell it was sunny outside from the way the paper panels on the sliding door were a bright, pure white. It was a quiet, peaceful morning.

"Mn.....still, it's heavy."

It had to be *that*. Kurogitsune was sprawled out on top of Yue's stomach, sleeping. He always thought his animal form was less convenient, but since it was what came most natural, it didn't seem to bother him. He snored faintly.

"Ngh.....I can't eat anymore."

Yue was amazed by his seemingly happy sleep-talk. Always greedy when it came to food whether he was asleep or awake, he ate two dinners last night as well. He had a feast of karaage at Tsubaki's house, and the sweet and sour pork Ranchuu prepared for him. Eating both, his stomach was visibly extended.....that was probably why he was so heavy.

"Kurogitsune, hey, Kurogitsune."

Since he wouldn't respond after calling out to him repeatedly, Yue sat up. A black mass rolled off the futon with a thud. As expected, that seemed to wake him up.

"Wha.....what do you think you're doing, hey!!"

Yue was a little jealous he could wake up and immediately be so energetic like that.

"You wouldn't wake up, Kurogitsune. I kept calling you."

"Then you should have kept calling me until I woke up. Aah.....I could have had a little more roast chicken....."

Yue also felt jealous of Kurogitsune's ability to display such gluttony without any shame even in his dreams. If only he were able to eat like that, then he may have been able to finish all the karaage from last night without leaving any behind.

"You still want to eat? Why don't you ask Ranchuu to make you some?"

"Baaah! Asking that guy for stuff is a pain. You know that."

When he watched Ranchuu and Kurogitsune, they looked like they got along well, but they said themselves that all they do is argue. They would have their amusing little fights day after day, and even though they didn't usually settle their differences, it was always water under the bridge. He probably wasn't going to ask him for any favors if he didn't want to be indebted to him.

"If you don't want me getting in your way, sleep in your own room."

Annoyed, Yue gave him his honest opinion.

"No way."

He immediately replied.

"My room has too much stuff in it. There's no space for me to sleep, got it?"

"You say that with a lot of confidence, huh?"

Since Kurogitsune was sticking out of his chest triumphantly, Yue also responded with a serious face.

"Of course, cause it's the truth. It's all a bunch of stuff different people gave me that I can't throw out."

"Hmmm....."

It was rare for Kurogitsune to talk about his own room. He always found some way or another to avoid the subject, so Yue never asked much about it. They seemed to be things given to him by people Yue didn't know that he set aside as treasured items. He had never actually seen it, so he didn't really know if it was true. From an outsider's point of view, it was just useless junk, but to Kurogitsune they were irreplaceable treasures. At least that was what he heard from someone before. Kurogitsune had lived much longer than him. That's why it wasn't unusual for Yue not to know about various things. He didn't have anything he could give Kurogitsune. Yue felt a little bad about that.

"Ah, I don't need anything from you! I don't have any place to put it!"

Kurogitsune informed him in a loud voice as if he had read his mind. He then told him he was going to find a place to go back to sleep as he left the room. Kurogitsune's tail swiftly disappeared behind the lowest opening in the paper paneled doors that lined the second floor hallway. He used it as his personal way in and out.

"You don't need anything from me, huh. I.....I wonder.....if I'll also disappear one day, and end up leaving someone

behind.”

For instance, like whoever gave Kurogitsune his “treasures” that were gone now, or like this *Yoshiki Sakura Tsubaki* continued to search for.


“.....I don’t know.”

He interrupted his thoughts that seemed to have fallen into an infinite loop.

“I felt like I was fine either way, but.....not choosing may be difficult.”

Weaving its way between the pauses in the words he spoke to himself, the clock on the wall ticked away the time. Yue knew he was at his wit’s end. Today he would be going to the town in the evening to search for leads to the principal’s disappearance. If he were able to become their friends, and enjoy his time with them, he would no longer need peace of mind.

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

 frillyfujoshitranslations.tumblr.com/post/137846250247/akaya-akashiya-ayakashino-kagekui-machi-no

Chapter 7 Desired Demise

Tougo took a bigger swing than usual, making the rusted chains creak. No longer trying to hide his irritation, even talking was frustrating. Night ended yesterday without him getting any sleep. Of course he didn't put much effort in class, the teacher's voice just went in one ear and out the other. He thought about Yoshiki, about Akane, about Yaiichi. No matter what unimaginable reasons there were, Yaiichi's words only disoriented Tougo even more.

—I don't believe people disappear like this out of selfishness, but because they want to protect those important to them.

He thought about the true meaning behind Yaiichi's words all day. He really couldn't understand them.

".....Tsubaki, hey, Tsubaki."

Continuing to stare at the ground, he didn't immediately notice Akiyoshi's voice calling to him from a little distance away. He could tell from Akiyoshi's expression that he must have been calling out to him repeatedly.

".....were you calling me?"

"Yeah. Several times.....are you all right?"

He probably wasn't all right. However, he didn't want any help either.

"There's nothing you can do about what's been happening over the past few days. Probably those akujiki going after you as well. Unfortunately, you're predisposed to those sorts of things. It's better to be safe than sorry."

He stuck out his legs to stop the swing. His feet kicked up a whitish cloud of sand.

"I was wondering about it before, but what do you mean by predisposed?"

Akiyoshi briefly made a puzzled face, but eventually understanding the question, he started to speak.

"You're special."

He made a grim face before continuing.

"You told me before that ayakashi would go after you ever since you were young, right?"

"Yeah. Things like from yesterday.....not so much lately though."

"More than your own predisposition, your family lineage seems to be special. Other than you.....your mother was spirited away, wasn't she?"

"Not really."

He tried to tell him she just ran away with some man, but Akiyoshi interrupted him.

"I don't know much about it either. It's nothing more than my assumption.....but, there's no way you being an easy target, and fox mask showing up *aren't* connected. Those akujiki and that guy definitely have the same goal. Fox mask is just more skilled."

“How can you be so certain?”

The last of his words unintentionally became harsh. He asked him this one question, leaving him no room to ignore him.

“That’s.....”

Akiyoshi hesitated to speak.

“What did you mean by that?”

He knew in his mind Akiyoshi meant no animosity. He wasn’t the target of his blame of course. He looked a little hurt at Tougo’s words.

“Tsubaki. You may resent these injustices, but.....”

When Akiyoshi opened his heavy mouth, he heard a familiar carefree voice behind him.

“Heeey, thanks for waiting~”

The reason he was late to arrive was probably because he had been loitering, and walking aimlessly. He approached Tougo and Akiyoshi in his usual manner. The sound of his geta echoed on the dry ground today as well.

“You’re late, fox mask. Do ayakashi not understand what the word *punctual* means?”

Akiyoshi, who seemed unable to greet him without at least one complaint, warned Tougo in a voice only he could hear before Yue came any closer to them.

“Be careful around fox mask. I’ve been saying that from the start.”

“.....”

Tougo didn’t reply.

“Hey, you two. What are we doing today?”

“There’s nothing we can do, we’ve run out of places we can go.”

Kurogitsune let out a huge sigh from Yue’s shoulder as soon as they showed up. He was unmotivated as usual.

“Heeey, come on out, principal!”

“He’s probably not going to show up just because you called him.”

“Can’t be helped, all we have left to try is calling for him.”

Kurogitsune moved to Akiyoshi’s shoulder as he let out his curses.

“Tsubaki, what’s wrong? You seem kind of down today.”

Yue came up next to Tougo who had put some distance between them.

“It must be about yesterday, right?”

“Not really.”

“It’ll be all right. Even if an akujiki comes, I’ll protect you, Tsubaki.”

"Up until now, I came just because I thought I'd like to see you, but now, I think it would be nice if I could protect you, Tsubaki."

Yue told him confidently. A strand of his pale bangs fell against his forehead.

"Yesterday was a little dangerous, but I won't be careless anymore."

Tougo felt the depths of his chest grow colder and colder. He wanted to refuse everything. It didn't matter who said it, or how kind they were, he didn't want to believe any of it.

".....enough already."

Yue was taken aback by Tougo's bitter tone.

"Tsubaki?"

All of the confusion and anxiety he had been suppressing overflowed all at once.

"I don't know what you mean by protect me. You show up all of a sudden, but what the hell do you want with me!?"

"Tsubaki."

He knew Akiyoshi and Kurogitsune were looking at him. He saw them watching him with worried looks from the corner of his eye. Losing his cool like that all of a sudden would surprise anyone. While he knew his innermost thoughts were unsightly, Tougo was unable to stop expressing how he felt.

"It's just like in my stupid memories, you say you'll protect me over and over again, but what do you even want.....!?"

Yue was watching Tougo silently. He lost his look of wanting to argue back, and now seemed sad.

"Even though you'll just disappear.....the same as that guy."

".....you mean, Yoshiki Sakura?"

He was shocked when Yue spoke that name.

".....huh?"

"That person also told you he'd protect you, didn't he, Tsubaki?"

Yue continued with a calm expression. He didn't know what his intentions were, but there was absolutely no way Tougo could respond calmly while his stomach was still seething.

".....yeah. But it was a bold-faced lie. He said he'd protect me, but all he did was ruin everything."

His pounding heart hurt. His vision wavered, perhaps with anger, or maybe tears. Tougo hoped it was just because he hadn't been getting much sleep.

"He always came to save me, but behind all that he betrayed me and my dad. Along with my mom.....the two of them ran away together."

He glared at Yue with only the dizziness he felt in his head. Tougo knew at the very least that wasn't Yue's intention. He knew that, but he couldn't stop.

"Did you come here to ruin something too? Wanting to protect me is just a lie, isn't it? What are you trying to take

away from me this time?”

Yue smiled faintly. Tougo thought it looked sad.

“Tsubaki.....I’m not Yoshiki-san.”

Yue shook his head once again as he repeated what he had to say, as if he were persuading a child.

“That’s why...I can’t become a replacement for Yoshiki-san.”

“.....”

“But, I don’t think Yoshiki-san betrayed you at all, Tsubaki. I think he definitely wanted to protect you, because you were important to him.”

—*He wanted to protect you.*

He didn’t want to hear it. How did any of that mean he wanted to protect him? Tougo didn’t wish for any of this. Hearing Yue who didn’t know the truth, speak as if he knew everything, made him unbearably angry.

“.....enough already.”

His voice became cold.

“Huh?”

It looked as though Yue was unable to process Tougo’s words.

“Enough already. You don’t need to protect me, so leave me alone. Don’t follow me around anymore.”

Tougo turned away from Yue who was blatantly shocked. He didn’t want to talk anymore, even if it was just him expressing his own heavy emotions.

“Tsubaki!”

Yue called his name from behind him. If he ran, he’d no longer be able to hear that either. Luckily, it didn’t look like he was going after him.

Yue watched Tougo leave in shock. Akiyoshi approached him. Kurogitsune returned to Yue’s shoulder.

“Hey, he left. What did you say to Tsubaki, fox mask?”

“That guy is the type who’s a lot of trouble when he snaps, huh~”

Kurogitsune was somehow nonchalant.

“Let’s go after him. You can tell me what happened later.”

“.....but, Tsubaki told me not to follow him around anymore.”

The moment he left, Tougo looked as if he were about to cry. He may have already been crying. He kind of looked like a little boy no different from his own age. He was like a cornered lost child, Yue thought. Even so, this lost child would refuse being searched for. Therefore, he shouldn’t go after him. Akiyoshi pushed Yue who was standing stock still in his hesitation.

“You need to go after him. If you truly think you’d like to protect Tsubaki that is.”

“Haa, haa, haa.....”

He ran recklessly after leaving the park to get away from Yue. He wanted to somehow shake off the unpleasant thoughts entwined around him. He was aware that was a childish feeling, but that was why he was unable to regain his composure. It was clearly impossible, so Tougo continued to run away. His breathing was disheveled, his sides hurt, and his knees were giving out. It was the same as when he would run away from akujiki. He was unable to run away from his troubles, or his own thoughts. Even now, if he lost his focus, Yoshiki would float back into his mind. Yue's words remained in his ears.

“.....damn it.”

All he could do was curse. Half the sky was covered with a deep blue. He remembered the time he had to head to the kindergarten. He looked at his watch, but it was already way past the designated time. He was close to the school. He hadn't gone through the usual school gate, but the side entrance used by staff. The trees growing around the area were the one's Tougo was used to seeing from his classroom. Only the staff room and a few classroom lights were on. The school building had fallen silent. The school and the kindergarten were placed on opposite sides of the park, walking from here would be difficult. Even if he were to hurry, it would be an over thirty minute trip. He had run blindly at almost full speed. His footsteps were so unsteady it was laughable. He hadn't been sleeping or eating well lately, so that was natural.

“.....damn it, protect what?”

Tougo spat out to no one in particular. He had been saved countless times. There was no way he could forget. If no one had saved him, Tougo wouldn't be here now. He was well aware of that. Even if Yoshiki's motives weren't for Tougo's sake, but for Yaiichi and Akane, he couldn't help feeling resentful. It was just frustrating that he didn't know anything. Being the only one ignorant to everything angered him. He didn't know about his parents, about Yoshiki, or about what Akiyoshi spoke of—his predisposition. If his predisposition was in their bloodline, then Akane really must have been—spirited away. From Akiyoshi's words, he could no longer deny that possibility. However, like with the principal, he hadn't forgotten. That would be like denying the fact he was attacked by akujiki. At that time, Tougo was the only one who saw Yoshiki take Akane away. Yoshiki, who said he wanted to protect Tougo, didn't actually need to take Akane with him. If Akane had been searching for Yoshiki, then she must have thought of just having him stay in the town. Even so, that's not what happened. Akane shook Tougo's hand away, abandoned Yaiichi, and disappeared. Memories of Akane still vividly remained inside of them even now. It was like the proof of their descent into adultery. Then there was when Yaiichi suddenly brought home a baby. He told Tougo he took in a new family member with his usual troubled smile. Tougo had never asked much about the baby his father named Hina who was most likely a sibling from another mother. He probably should have asked more about it. Perhaps he had to take her in, as he was known to do, when he saw the child crying and screaming, unable leave her there. If that was the case, he wondered if it would have changed anything. She had to be a child from another mother. Even though he realized that it was a pointless assumption, Tougo couldn't stop. He should have chased after Akane, crying and screaming until Yoshiki gave up on her.....

“Stupid.”

He unconsciously wiped his damp cheeks. He just couldn't do the things he was unable to do. Tougo had been that sort of child since long ago. There was no longer anything he could do, since it had already happened.

However...

If he had one wish, he wanted to know the reason. If he did, he probably wouldn't be suffering so much. It would have been nice if he didn't have to continue resenting the people important to him for all these years. Under different

circumstances, he may have been able to become friends with Yue and Akiyoshi. Tougo thought about that absentmindedly while being aware that may have just been fantasy.

His head hurt from crying. He was glad the street was dark and no one was around. He would have certainly been embarrassed if anyone had seen him. Tougo rubbed his runny nose, and headed toward the kindergarten. It was way past the time he had to pick up Hina, so he owed her his sincerest apologies. He didn't want to make Yaiichi worry. He would make dinner as soon as he got home. Hina was definitely going to pout. To make her feel better, he would make her favorite foods, maybe hamburger, or gratin, he had already made karaage yesterday, so.....Tougo started to walk as he recalled what was in their refrigerator. Various basic everyday ingredients saved Tougo at times like this.

—*Hey*

He had only walked for a short time to cut across the garden in front of the school as a shortcut. Concerned about the voice he heard, he lifted his face.

—*Hey, oniichan*

It was a faint, quiet voice like the sound of a bell tumbling down. He stopped his feet, and looked for the owner of the voice, but he couldn't see anyone. This wasn't a place children would normally be to begin with. It was a childish voice, but it wasn't Hina's.

“Who's there?”

—*Over here, over here*

It was a rather cheerful, excited voice.

—*Don't be so scared. Okay, ufufufu*

Her voice was quiet, clear—and distorted. Realizing that, Tougo ran as fast as he could. He had a feeling if he were able to get away from the school grounds he would be able to escape. There was no time to worry about his unsteady feet. He desperately kicked off the familiar stone pavement.

—*You're running away, oniichan?*

He wasn't sure if he could call that voice innocent. It was an awfully excited voice, but on the other side, it had a cruel sound.

“Damn it.”

He couldn't believe this was happening again today. He couldn't help but curse his own carelessness at that moment. He needed to overcome this dilemma somehow. It was about ten more meters to the school gate. He couldn't see the owner of the voice. Since it was dark all around, it wouldn't be odd if she was hiding somewhere, but Tougo in his frightened state was unable to see her. If he could at least get to a public road, there would be people out on the street, as well as streetlamps. The cold metal of the school gate locked with a heavy chain and a padlock pierced the palms of his hands. Unconcerned, he put his feet against it, trying to climb over, but at that moment...

“!”

He felt himself float in midair from his stomach.

—*Caught you~*

It was like she was singing.

—*This isn't hide and seek, oniichan*

The owner of the voice laughed like an adult.

“Uwh, guh.”

He was pulled back down from the school gate he was climbing, his back being pressed down with force. Since he was defenseless, the shock was immense. The bag he was holding onto was thrown down.

—*Oniichan, I've been waiting for sooo long. Like a good girl*

“.....wha.....”

He tried to stand up, but there was something like rope wrapped several times around his stomach, so he was unable to lift his body at all. It was difficult for him to figure out what powers were at work on his back with his eyesight fixed upwards.

—*That's why, hey, you should tell me I'm a good girl, oniichan, okay?*

The voice gradually became clearer. Tougo gave up and relaxed. In his fallen on the ground state, he looked at the sky when he opened his eyes. Stars floated in the clear sky, the light of the moon was shining bright.

“What are you!?”

Up until now, none of the monsters that had attacked Tougo were able to use words. He didn't know whether they had intelligence or not, but they seemed to be able to at least speak one or two incoherent words. The only one he was able to hold a conversation with like this was Kurogitsune. That's why he may have been careless.

—*Me? I'm——*

He didn't catch her name. A shadow suddenly appeared next to Tougo's head. It was a small, black and dark shadow of a person. She wore a yellow smock and hat like the ones from Hina's kindergarten, along with a uniform skirt. Her glossy long, long black hair flowed down her back. Due to her bangs, and her hat pulled down over her eyes, he couldn't make out her expression.

“.....you're the one who ate the principal, aren't you?”

When questioned, the corners of the girl's mouth lifted up into a smile once again. It was smile that didn't suit her childish appearance at all.

—*Ufufu.....the principal was so yummy. He was soft, and warm, I loved him. Right~?*

“Why did you eat him?”

He was aware it was a foolish question. Tougo wanted to know. Why they ate humans.

—*You asked something strange, oniichan. Fine, I'll tell you*

Her long black hair undulated. Each strand of her hair darker than the night sky floated into the air as if they each had their own free will. Tougo's body was also stuck in midair. His grasped abdomen hurt. At that moment, the young girl's black hair constricting Tougo covered his eyes. His vision darkened completely. He was literally sucked into the depths of darkness. He felt overwhelmed.

—*Hang in there for a bit*

Still unable to see, he felt acceleration, but even that died down immediately.

—*Thanks for waiting*

The young girl laughed. The place he fell with a thud was expectedly hard, but it wasn't earth. Gradually a faint light returned before his eyes. They seemed to be in a room. There were florescent lights lined up on the ceiling, so Tougo knew they were in some classroom—when he moved his gaze, there were desks neatly lined up. Someone's forgotten notebook was flipped open. The green emergency light near the entrance felt awfully vivid.

—*Hey, oniichan*

“.....”

—*Do you like warm things? Kind things? Sweet things? Nostalgic things.....yummy things?*

“.....what do you mean?”

Fear struck him as she questioned him. She released the hair wrapped around his stomach. He somehow managed to lift his upper body and grasp the situation.

—*I like everyone*

That's why...

The little girl continued to speak to Tougo even though he couldn't understand what she was saying.

—*I ate the principal*

“Why.....did you do that?”

The young girl answered pragmatically.

—*Because I liked him. Because he was yummy. When I ate him, he was sweet and tasty, he made me happy*

“.....you're going to eat me too?”

—*You're special, oniichan*

He could see her small, sharp white teeth lined up in her split open mouth.

“Hey, Yue, what did you say to that guy?”

“.....I didn't really say anything.....”

Why did Tougo, much to his surprise, become uncomfortable and angry around him at times? Every time it happened, Yue felt completely lost.

“I told Tsubaki I wasn't the person he was looking for, that was it.”

“.....hmph. I certainly don't know about that either.”

Akiyoshi pushed up his glasses, agreeing with him.

“.....you mean, Yoshiki Sakura, right?”

Kurogitsune asked jumping from Akiyoshi's shoulder to Yue's.

“Huh, how did you know, Kurogitsune?”

Hitting it right on the nose, Yue's eyes widened.

“It'd be weird if I didn't know.”

“Really?”

Kurogitsune sighed with lowered ears when Yue tilted his head.

“Really. Well, I guess you wouldn't know.....”

“I know for sure fox mask is someone who can't read the mood. So, who is Yoshiki Sakura?”

“That's what you want to know? You really are a pain too, masked four-eyes.”

I don't know much about it either though, Kurogitsune added on, sitting back down on Yue's shoulder. He squinted one eye when Kurogitsune's tail touched his cheek.

“Anyway, is it really all right not go after him?”

“I guess I really should.”

Yue hesitated when he remembered being brushed off.

“Of course! When that guy says not to come after him, he really means he wants you to!”

“.....really?”

“Really!!”

Yue honestly couldn't understand that. Why would he say something he didn't mean? Tougo's sharp voice echoed coldly in his ears. Nevertheless, Yue was concerned about Tougo and his shoulders that were trembling helplessly.

“That's really.....complicated.”

“Either way, aside from not knowing Tsubaki's destination, it isn't wise for us to move around blindly.”

Akiyoshi pushed up his glasses once again. It was something he did when he was uneasy.

“He'd normally be picking up Hina-chan at this time.....but he ran in the opposite direction.”

They all agreed they would head in that direction for now. At that moment...

“Yue-kun! This is bad!”

Small footsteps were running toward them. The owner of the voice calling to Yue was Tougo's little sister.

“What's wrong, Hina-chan?”

The young girl caught her breath as she told them her big brother hadn't come to pick up her up, and that she had a bad feeling about it.

"I kind of have the feeling.....something really bad is going to happen."

Those words didn't suit a girl her age, so they could have brushed it off as her imagination. However, in this situation, that could not be allowed.

"Hina-chan."

".....a young girl's sixth sense is nothing to trifle with. Little sister Tsubaki, give us the basics."

Akiyoshi knelt down in front of Hina to listen to what she had to say.

"You know, something really bad took oniichan away.....He must be so scared. What should Hina do....."

Her soft voice sounded as if she were going to cry at any moment. He wondered what Tougo would think of her bravely holding back her tears.

"There's not a moment to lose. Let's go."

Akiyoshi carried Hina on his back as he started to run.

"Tsubaki....."

Kurogitsune scolded Yue who remained behind uncertain.

"You can worry and apologize later! Okay? Look sharp!"

If you really want to protect that guy, he added. Yue pursed his lips at his words and nodded. The cold night air gradually calmed, as if nothing had happened at all.

The green emergency light blinked every once in a while. Once his eyes adjusted, the light of the moon also helped him to see better in the dark.

"Special?"

—*Because you're a 3-star, oniichan*

The word sounded positive despite its unsettling resonance.

—*The principal was really yummy, but he wasn't my meal. Even though he was so sweet and tasty*

The little girl lowered her eyes sadly. Her long lashes shook.

—*It can't be helped, since my eyes are bad. I can't find my true meals. But.....you're different, oniichan*

He was starting to understand less and less of what she was telling him. In other words, Tougo, compared to others, must have been—to these monsters—the finest of foods. He was highly sought after more than anyone else because he was delicious to them. This must have been what Akiyoshi meant by predisposed. Tougo wasn't sure if they meant "meals" in the same way humans did, but from her explanation, that seemed to be exactly what it meant. There was no mistake that the young Tougo had been their target. The way they all came after him could be for no other reason than the predisposition Akiyoshi spoke about.

"I'm good for nothing else, huh....."

—*You were always being protected by someone, so you were difficult to eat, oniichan—but I've finally got you alone.*

And—

The young girl smiled. The darkness enveloping her small body became even deeper. It looked like a writhing shadow.

—I ate lots and lots so I could become stronger.....

“.....wha...”

—I won't lose this time

He tried to get up to escape, but his knees wouldn't listen to him. Tougo collapsed in that spot. The little girl closed their distance with one step. Her black hair wrapped around his ankle.

—To the things like me who can't really tell what's tasty, you're like a delicious feast.....hey, once I eat you, I wonder if I'll finally know

With another step, the darkness closed in on him. Tougo wanted to look away, but he was unable to take his eyes away from her.

—I wonder if even I can know when something is actually delicious.....

Her voice had traces of ecstasy as she took another step toward Tougo. His wrapped up ankle cried out in pain. The little girl no longer had a form, she became a deep dark mass like the monster that attacked Tougo yesterday. In the place where her eye sockets should have been were just two empty holes, and lined up in her open crescent shaped mouth were saw-like teeth reflecting white in the moonlight. Her long hair squirming like snakes wrapped around Tougo's entire body, now not only his ankle, but the movement of his entire body was constricted. When it tied around his neck he could barely breathe. A cold sweat fell from his forehead.

“A...ku...jiki.....”

—Don't say such cruel things, oniichan. I'm so happy right now after all

“.....no, stop.”

Both fear and resignation raged in his mind, tears forming in the corner of his eyes. Unable to escape by any means, he knew this disaster was just his own luck. If Tougo didn't have such terrible luck he wouldn't have been such fine food for akujiki, and he would have someone to protect him. However, since he did, he was completely helpless. Was he worthy enough for protection anyway? That doubt crossed his thoughts. Tougo swallowed down his calls for help. All he ever did was rely on the help of others, think of himself, and complain. He thought it was natural to have someone protect him. He cursed his own foolishness. The akujiki spat out its laughter. Its breath spilled out from between its teeth, overflowing with joy. He could tell it was enjoying its pleasure all throughout its body. It took all Tougo's strength to turn away from the darkness before his eyes. He resisted with all his might. Even so, he was unable to escape from the feeling of the darkness touching his skin.

“.....someone.”

He unconsciously formed his last words. His throat gave out, his voice losing its sound. With a weak sigh, his lips feebly begged for help.

—Ufufu.....

The akujiki that still had the voice of a small girl laughed. A silhouette floated into his flickering consciousness as he suffocated. *Aah, this person*, Tougo thought. He had a feeling the person in his memories was smiling faintly under the mask hiding his face.

(.....)

Tougo's consciousness cut off there.

"G-Guh..."

He awoke on impact. A pain ran through his entire body like a tingling sensation. Thinking he had been eaten, he hesitantly opened his eyes, but his assumption was wrong.

"*Cough, cough.*"

He coughed violently several times from the pain. He seemed to have struck the blackboard at the back of the classroom. Notices had been torn down and fluttered to the floor. He realized he had been set free from the akujiki's hair around his body.

"Tsubaki! Are you all right!?"

The one rushing up to him was Yue.

"Huh.....? What.....are you doing here.....?"

A few seconds later, Akiyoshi and Hina came into view. They seemed to have come in from the door at the front of the classroom that had been broken down.

"You're all right.....I'm glad we made it in time."

He told him they would talk more later before turning back to the akujiki. He stood in front of Tougo.

"I won't hand over Tsubaki to you."

"Why are you....."

"Because I promised. I'll protect you, Tsubaki."

He answered without turning around this time.

—*So you've come.....hey, don't get in my way please.....*

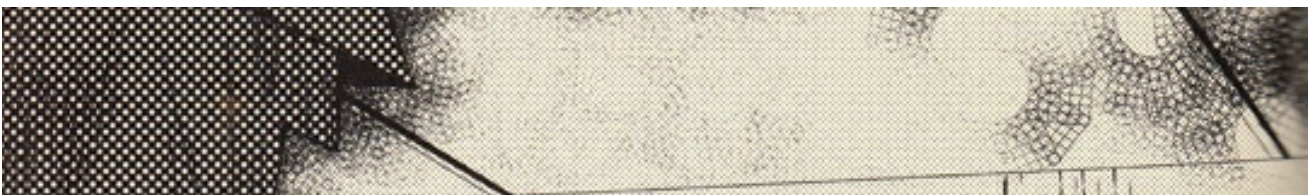
The akujiki wrapped in a miasma turned to Yue.

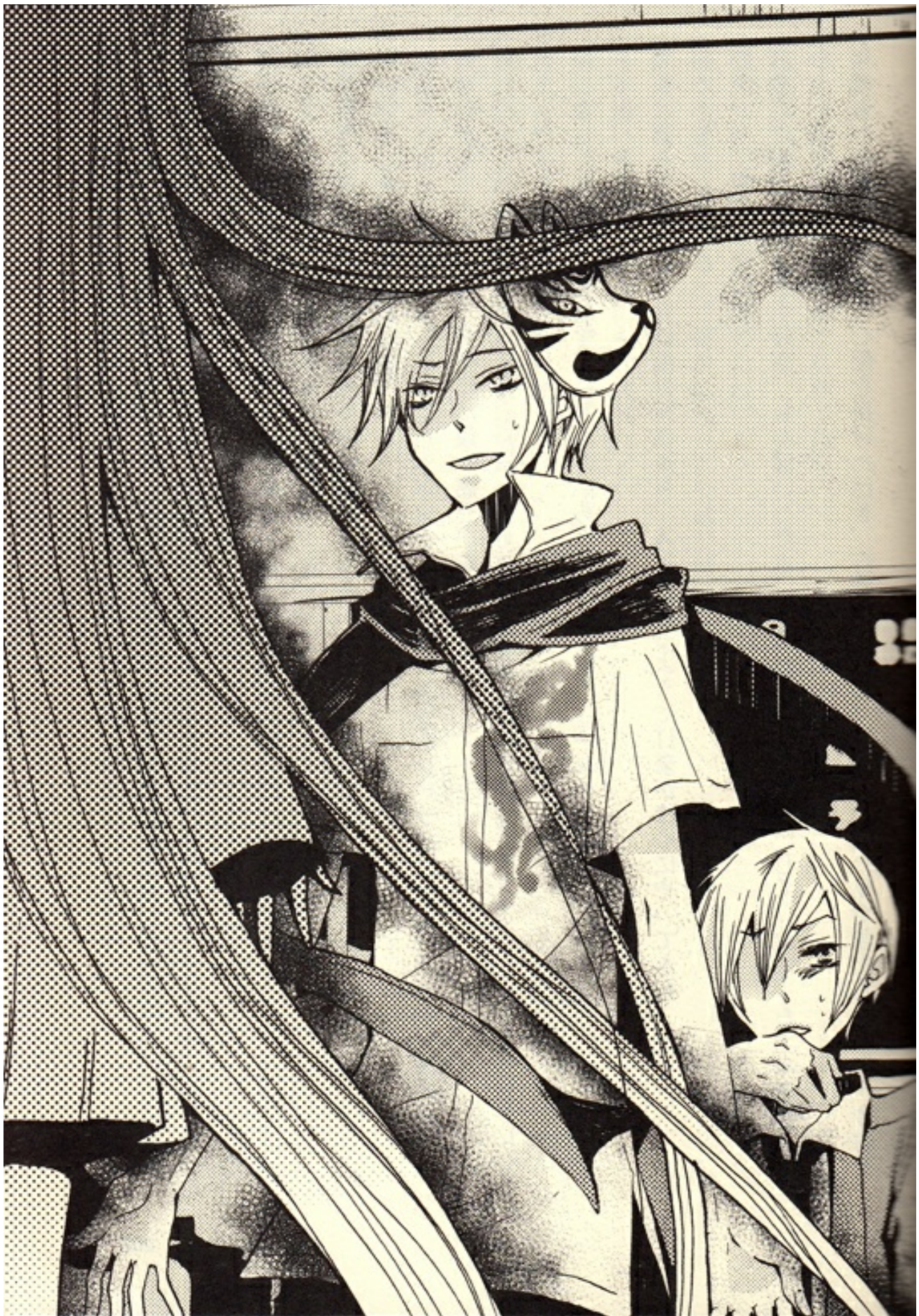
—*That...feast...is mine*

The black hair that had grabbed Tougo earlier snapped through the air like a whip. It wrapped around a nearby desk and chair, throwing them to the side. Yue lost his balance trying to dodge the thrown chair. There was a heavy clattering sound. The broken top of the desk fell by Tougo's feet.

"That's no good."

Yue told her gently.





Tougo was unable to figure out if he was chiding her, or warning her, since he couldn't see his expression. Another

bundle of hair grabbed his wrist from the opposite side this time. He was dragged then slammed hard against the wall near the hallway.

“Kh!”

Someone’s textbook fell from their desk.

“Yue!”

Kurogitsune stopped Tougo from running up to him.

“It’s fine, don’t move from there.”

“But!”

When he tried to move, a sharp pain ran through his back.

“You’re the one it’s going after. We don’t need you getting more hurt, so stay right there.”

He couldn’t say anything back with his stifled voice, so Tougo had no choice but to obey.

“Hey, Yue, behind you!”

Kurogitsune shouted his warning as he ran towards Yue, replacing him, Hina came to his side.

“Oniichan!”

“Hina.....why are you here?”

“You didn’t come to pick me up.....so Hina was worried. Hina asked Yue-kun and the others to find you, oniichan.”

Tougo was ashamed for worrying his still young little sister. Even though he should have been her responsible older brother, he was in the complete opposite role right now.

“But, Hina’s glad you’re safe, oniichan.”

A relieved expression came across her face.

“You scraped your cheek.”

There was certainly a small amount of blood on his cheek when he put his hand to it.

“Sorry, Hina.....you too, Akky.”

He said his thanks to Akiyoshi who was watching over him a step away.

“Don’t worry us so much please.”

Akiyoshi said in a weak voice.

“And then, thank fox mask. He’s the one who knocked that akujiki away from you.”

“Yue did.....?”

The impact Tougo felt when he woke up was the recoil from when Yue had struck the body of the akujiki trying to eat him. It was an action he couldn’t imagine someone as delicate as Yue doing. The akujiki and Yue were glaring at each other in the middle of the classroom.

“Akiyoshi, please. Get Tsubaki out of here.”

Yue glanced toward them. His face was more serious than he had ever seen it up until now. He turned back to the akujiki once Akiyoshi nodded. The two of them glared at each other in the middle of the small classroom that was now a cleared space from the desks and chairs being knocked away. On top of a fallen desk near the window a little away from Yue was Kurogitsune with his hair on end. They were at a stalemate.

—*You have so many though*

“Hey! Don’t be stupid, this guy can only choose one!”

Kurogitsune shouted unable to keep quiet any longer.

“Kurogitsune.”

Yue restrained him, then spoke quietly to the akujiki.

“Sorry, Tsubaki is mine.”

—*I saw him first!*

The enraged akujiki’s hair with traces of a dark miasma attacked Yue. It broke the glass of the windows, and opened up a hole in the ceiling, pieces of the fluorescent lights rained down. The emergency light also broke, making the classroom even darker. He saw Yue try to dodge it, but it grabbed his foot, using that opportunity to wrap strands of its hair around Yue’s body tightly to suffocate him. One of his geta fell with a dry sound.

“Yue!!”

Kurogitsune bit at the hair, but his attack was pointless. Tougo who was dumbfounded was pulled by Akiyoshi toward the outside of the classroom.

“Hurry, Tsubaki.”

“Akky?”

“Hurry! We’re going outside.”

It was a forceful tone. This was the first time Tougo had heard Akiyoshi speak so strongly.

“But, he’s.....”

“There’s no point in us being here. We’ll just get in the way.”

Even if he couldn’t do much for Yue struggling in pain, there was no way he could leave him there and run away. Yue had tried to save him. This was happening because of Tougo’s own selfish actions, running away wasn’t an option.

“Yue!”

Yue could only smile at him with his eyes when Tougo yelled out to him. All he mouthed was, *it’ll be all right*. The akujiki turned its attention toward Tougo. Akiyoshi just barely avoided its outstretched hand in a hurry, running out of the classroom door into the hallway. Opposite of Akiyoshi was Hina pulling on Tougo’s hand. The warped door then closed.

“.....”

There was another clattering sound of something being broken.

“It’ll be all right. That guy won’t be taken down so easily.”

Akiyoshi’s voice trembled as he spoke. His hand being pulled was damp with sweat. He wasn’t sure who it was coming from.

“Look.”

Akiyoshi pointed toward the glass window separating the classroom and the hallway. It was cracked in several places, but he could see what was happening inside. Yue was in its grasp, but they seemed to be talking about something.

“Sorry.”

He could barely hear Yue’s apology. His back was facing them, so he couldn’t make out his expression. A golden flame arose from the hair of the akujiki constricting him.

—*N...o.....aah*

The flame burned in an instant, filling the classroom with a loud sound. The flame spread from her hair to the black shadow that only half an hour ago was in the form of a little girl, ruthlessly corroding it. Even the miasma consuming the space started to fade from the areas licked by flames. The akujiki was losing its shape.

—*UWAAAAaaaaAAHHH*

“.....kh!”

Its dying wail shook the windows. Unable to stand it, Tougo covered his ears. No matter how hard he pressed the palms of his hands against them, its hoarse strained screams entered his ears.

“This wasn’t what I had in mind.”

Yue said sadly. His voice sounded as if someone had hurt him terribly. It actually sounded like he was mocking himself to Tougo. Inside of the flames, the akujiki who had lost most of its form muttered in a girlish voice.

—*Liar.....*

Even though his ears were covered, that voice reached his ears loud and clear. The traces of its screams of agony wrapping around his ear drums finally cut off. Tougo and the others hesitantly lifted their faces. Yue had turned to them.

“.....?”

He felt something was off for just a moment. Before he could even wonder what the reason for that was, Yue smiled a little. His expression from behind the glass was weak, but he was relieved. Tougo and the others rushed back to the classroom in a hurry. Even though the classroom had been engulfed in such bright flames, there were no traces of anything being burnt, nor a single piece of ash left. Aside from the neatly arranged desks and chairs that had been thrown about, and the scattered bulletins, it didn’t look like anything had taken place inside of the classroom at all. The cold winter air blew in from the broken window. It was the same as when he had saved Tougo in the park.

“Yue!”

Tougo rushed to Yue who sank to the wooden floor, perhaps from losing consciousness. A sharp pain ran through his right ankle, but Tougo ignored it. He must have sprained something.

"Are you all right!?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"What about you, Tsubaki, are you all right?"

When asked, he looked around his own body once again. Other than his scrape from earlier, and his ankle, there were no other external injuries that especially stood out. He could say nothing else other than he was lucky he was mostly uninjured despite the extravagant attack.

"Huh.....? Ah, yeah."

"That's good. I was able to keep my promise."

Yue tilted his head slightly, and Tougo finally realized the reason why he felt slightly off earlier.

"Your eyes.....?"

Normally his eyes were a golden color with traces of a green similar to the new leaves of a willow tree, but they had changed into the faint red of dusk. The color illuminated his eyelashes softly. The color emitting like a light was both beautiful and threatening.

"Huh? Ooh, this is..."

Unsure of how to explain, Yue briefly cut off his words. He thought as his eyes wandered.

"I borrowed his powers."

"Huh?"

"The fox living inside me.....lent me his powers."

Tougo couldn't believe his ears when he heard his unexpected and difficult to understand words. Yue just nodded without denying it.

"But, I'm glad I made it in time."

".....um, sorry. And thank you....."

Tougo apologized and thanked him with his head slightly lowered. He was too embarrassed to look him in the eye, so he continued to keep his gaze averted. As expected, Tougo wasn't able to settle the situation caused by his own misunderstanding and recklessness. On top of that, he didn't know what else to say to Yue, who got dragged into it, other than an apology. However, Yue questioned him with his head tilted.

"Huh? Why are you apologizing?"

"I said some terrible things, and made you push yourself again.....are you hurt?"

"It's just some scrapes, I'm fine. But, now I'm hungry.....heh heh."

More importantly, he continued.

I'm just happy you called my name, Tsubaki.

He scratched his head with a shy smile. Tougo also got caught up in the moment.

“Again with that. What do you want to eat this time?”

“Hmmm.....whatever Tsubaki makes.”

The two of them looked at each other when he made his totally vague request, and burst into laughter. His fatigue was covered gently by his relief.

“Got it. It’s a promise.”

“Eheh heh. Thanks.”

Tougo ensured he would keep his promise, then turned his eyes toward the disastrous scene inside of the classroom once again. The school will probably be in a huge uproar tomorrow morning. Even if they put the scattered desks back in place, it was impossible to repair the broken furnishings. Tougo checked his watch, but since it was broken he didn’t know the time. It was pitch black outside, clearly way past evening. He probably wouldn’t be able to avoid the commotion of his dad coming home and finding Hina and himself absent. Even more so for Akiyoshi and his noisy family that enforced a curfew. He wanted to avoid any more pointless mayhem.

“Akky, are you okay on time?”

The moment he spoke, Hina looked toward the hallway past the door at the back of the classroom, interrupting Tougo’s voice.

“Someone’s coming!”

Uneasiness suddenly ran through the room.

“Is that true, little sister Tsubaki?”

“Yes, but I don’t know who.....I sense a presence both good and bad.....”

Kurogitsune’s hair stood on end as he warned them.

“Be careful, Yue.”

The moment they all put themselves on guard, the sound of footsteps in the hall started to come closer. It was a hard sound, as if they were purposefully trying to make their presence known. With nothing to obstruct it in the hallway, the sharp sound of footsteps echoed harshly. The owner of the footsteps that seemed to know exactly where they were going stopped in front of the classroom, then calmly entered.

“Sagano.....san.....”

Yue called out. Kurogitsune’s face tensed. He could tell by the way he was breathing he was desperately trying to stay calm. Hina grasped the hem of Tougo’s uniform.

“What do *you* want?”

Akiyoshi stood in front of Yue.

“Hmmm.....a son of the Toochika family is protecting that guy?”

“You know me?”

Akiyoshi’s vigilance increased even more.

“Well, for various reasons. Are you really okay with this, Toochika?”

"This is my own decision. It has nothing to do with my family."

Sagano looked at him indifferently before warping his mouth into a smile.

"My business is with that guy over there. I've been waiting long enough. We're good now, right?"

He pointed out Yue with a condescending look. Overwhelmed, Akiyoshi took a step back.

"Move."

".....can't this wait until another opportunity? People have their own circumstances after all."

Akiyoshi said without moving away. His voice shook nervously.

"Akky's right! Don't come any closer!"

Hina added from next to him.

"I said you were in my way."

With the heavy sound of his shoes, Sagano took a step toward them. He glanced at Hina before sending Akiyoshi flying. With no time to even cry out, Akiyoshi fell on top of a knocked over desk. His back hit it hard as he groaned a little.

"Be a good boy."

The smile across the man's face sent shivers down Tougo's spine. The man then approached Yue, immediately swinging his pole—knocking right into his side.

"!"

There was no time to block him from Yue. The thin pole ate into Yue's side, knocking him away. Unable to escape on his own, Yue slammed into the desks a few meters away.

"Yue!"

Tougo rushed toward him.

"Uwh.....ow....."

Yue coughed over and over as he pressed on his stomach.

"Hey. If you don't hurry and come out, your vessel will get pitiful."

"....."

Sagano called Yue a vessel. Yue had also said he borrowed his power from a fox. Kurogitsune had told them he was human like Tougo. All this just confused him even more.

"What the hell do you want?"

"What do I want?"

Sagano intentionally opened one of his eyes widely as he questioned him back.

"I just want *to continue*."

“Huh.....?”

Sagano added to his words.

“The continuation of the reason why the children of the Tsubaki family become targets like you.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.....”

“Well, that’s probably true.”

I don’t expect you to understand, Sagano said. He struck the ground with the tip of his pole once again with a dull sound. It appeared that he could no longer stall with conversation.

“Can you stand, Yue?”

Tougo asked him in a quiet voice. He didn’t have any external wounds that stood out, but his exhaustion was severe. He must have had an awful bruise where he had been hit earlier. The color of his face looked even worse than before, and as though moving right away may be difficult. Tougo lent his shoulder to the staggering Yue.

“Ngh.....”

He stood up painfully with his brows furrowed, but his feet were unsteady. Opposite of Tougo who was trying to figure out how they could escape, Yue took his hand that was grasping his shoulder away.

“Heh, you’re pretty weak now.”

Sagano’s gaze seemed to be evaluating him. Yue glared directly back at those eyes.

“Sagano-san. What do you want from me?”

“How long do you intend on playing house with that fox, vessel?”

“.....I’m not a vessel. Besides, that fox has no intention of fighting you.”

“Ha, don’t mess with me. Who’s the one who forced things to end early.....?I’ve been waiting this whole time.”

Sagano took one step toward them with force, instantly closing the distance. Yue didn’t move. Coming to his senses, Tougo came between the two of them.

“Enough already.”

“Tsubaki.....”

Yue seemed surprised. Sagano’s aura at the shrine didn’t compare to his unusual presence now. He was different from an akujiki, but they both had the same twisted atmosphere.

“You too, don’t force yourself to stand on your own when you’re so unsteady.”

He told Yue behind him. He looked as though he couldn’t accept that.

“But.....this is a problem I need to settle myself.”

“If the actual person is saying it’s fine, move.”

“No.”

Sagano’s gaze overpowered Tougo with its unusual strength. It was like silence hidden in an abyss, or the presence

of a reddish black color of blood. His heart beat like a drum.

"I won't move."

Tougo repeated.

"Look, you've totally been taken in by his kindness. Didn't I tell you to be careful?"

—*Don't let your guard down around foxes*

Sagano had certainly told him that. Tougo didn't understand those words.

".....I don't take advice from arrogant strangers."

He obviously didn't have any positive proof that the pompous advice from someone he just met was true, so if he had to choose, Tougo preferred Yue. Sagano was someone trying to harm Yue who was already injured from protecting Tougo. Whether there was a reason for that or not, he would by no means oppose protecting Yue.

"You have a pretty sharp tongue, don't you, lost child of the Tsubakis."

".....lost.....? What do you mean?"

"You carelessly fell for this empty-headed façade of his, and were completely taken advantage of."

"Huh?"

"Eventually you'll be *eaten*."

The corners of Sagano's mouth raised into a wide smile. The teeth peeking from behind his thin lips shone white.

"If you don't believe me, ask the vessel yourself. Right? That's why you came down from the mountain, isn't it?"

The man pointed to Yue who had his head lowered behind Tougo. Yue slowly lifted his face when he turned to him.

".....sorry, Tsubaki."

"Sorry?Then it's true?"

"I can't deny it....."

Tougo knew for the first time what it felt like having his vision go pitch black. Everything gradually started to disappear from before his eyes. He never expected anything like this.

—No, he definitely had.

He knew it was a possibility. That's why he was always cautious. That's why he meticulously made sure to not to let himself be deceived, or let his guard down.

"Heh.....I see. So that's it."

"Tsubaki."

"So you have some sense after all. That fox deceives people like you, so he can continue living. He's been doing this since long, long ago."

Sagano told Tougo who didn't respond as he gestured for him to move. Tougo no longer knew what the truth was.

“.....”

“I’ve unmasked your true nature, so there’s no need to hold back anymore.....now, let’s continue.”

Sagano grasped Tougo who was frozen in place by the shoulder.

“Move, it’s dangerous.”

Despite his words, Tougo was knocked to the floor before he was able to protest or comply. Sharp pain had run through his body several times that day, he didn’t have the will power to lift himself up. The cold of the floor touching his cheek felt nice.

“You should have just eaten him then. You had plenty of chances.”

Sagano mocked him, but Yue denied it.

“I’m not going to eat him.”

Even Sagano was surprised by his statement. His eyes covered by his hood opened wide for a moment.

“Yue, hey, what are you saying.....!?”

“I’m not going to eat him.”

Kurogitsune who had been watching the whole affair rushed up to Yue in surprise. His frantic voice sounded apprehensive. Yue spoke quietly.

“I’ve already decided.”

“Idiot! If you don’t, you’ll.....”

Kurogitsune’s words trailed off, he wouldn’t tell him the rest. Yue spoke clearly with an expression that seemed refreshed.

“I’ve decided.”

Akiyoshi turned to Tougo with a shocked face, but Tougo was unable to react, and looked at Yue’s face dumbfounded.

“So you’re really going to end it all here?”

“I guess so.”

“Then I won’t hold back.”

Sagano approached Yue. He closed in on the space he had pushed Tougo out of the way from, and stood right in front of Yue.

“—Let’s end this.”

“!”

The end of his pole knocked Yue off his barely standing feet. Unable to resist, Yue fell onto his back, a heel then pushed into his stomach.

“.....ngh.”

Yue squirmed as his stomach was crushed. A muffled sound escaped from his throat that was unable to take a breath.

“Yue!”

Kurogitsune rushed up to him, but he was knocked away.

“Stand.”

Yue caught his strained breath as he stood, but the pole once again swung down onto his shoulder. There was the sharp sound of bones cracking.

“Hey, vessel, you’ve had enough and want to end this too, right?”

Sagano once again aimed his pole at Yue who was barely standing as he leaned on the pile of desks.

“That fox is just using you.”

His dark violet eyes under his hood wavered bewitchingly. Tougo didn’t know the reason why Sagano was so obsessed. He didn’t know why Yue continued to just stand there. He could only assume there must have been some deeply ingrained animosity between them. At the very least, the reason for Yue’s current wretched state was Tougo. If he hadn’t been captured by that akujiki, if he hadn’t blown up at Yue at the park, he definitely wouldn’t have ended up like this. If Tougo hadn’t put all his expectations in Yue, he wouldn’t have been captured in a place like this, he wouldn’t have despaired at Yue’s words. Sagano wasn’t beating him to the point where he couldn’t get up anymore, so at the very least he had the chance to escape, or fight back. Yue was thrown to the floor once again. Kurogitsune tried to help him, but was at an overwhelming disadvantage.

“It’s kind of too soon, but I’ll end it here.”

He felt a turbulent power from the pole he swung upwards. Tougo assumed Sagano, who had yet to mortally wound him, was really going to end it here. The pole swooshed down. It was in an instant. Tougo ran out. It was just a few steps of a distance. With a speed almost as fast as it took for Sagano’s pole to leave an after image, he took an impromptu risk.

“Take...that.....!”

He ran into Sagano’s body with all of his strength. He didn’t have a weapon. It was just a spur of the moment decision.

“.....”

Together with a dull sound, Sagano’s arm cut through the air, pushing Tougo back a few staggering steps.

“Don’t make me laugh. Do you want to be eaten that badly, child of the Tsubakis?”

His eyes full of anger glared at Tougo from close range. They overpowered him, making him want to move out of his way, but he desperately resisted.

“I don’t care anymore.”

Those were his true feelings. If he was going to be eaten, then he was going to be eaten. He just couldn’t stand by and watch Yue be extinguished without doing anything.

“Good job, Tougo!”

Kurogitsune stole Sagano's pole from him. However, he wasn't in the form of a small animal like he had been up until now, and had changed into a young boy of just fourteen or fifteen.

"Small creature.....!?"

Akiyoshi blinked his eyes.

"Hey, Akiyoshi! Stop that guy."

At almost the same time Kurogitsune raised his voice, Tougo who had been wrestling with Sagano, had been thrown to the side. Akiyoshi took his place, covering Tougo as he faced Sagano.

"From here on out, I, Akiyoshi Toochika, will be your opponent."

Kurogitsune yelled at Tougo who was now free.

"Tougo! Get Yue out of here. Hurry!!"

"But, Hina....."

"Oniichan, go! Hina will be fine. We'll come after you later."

Rushed, Tougo lent his shoulder to Yue who was still unable to move. They were both in poor conditions with their cheeks and arms covered in scrapes.

"Tsubaki....."

"It's fine, walk."

Tougo felt the pain of his own twisted ankle. He hadn't thought they were actually going to be able to escape. He somehow managed to open the warped door to exit the room. Before they went through the exit, he peeked back into the classroom and saw Sagano surrounded by Akiyoshi and the others. At first glance, it looked like they were at a stalemate, but Sagano's gaze fixed on Tougo and Yue was calm. Noticing Tougo's stare, he moved his lips, telling him something. There was no sound. Tougo looked away.

Once they left the classroom, the familiar hallway stretched out before them. It was a complete change from the disastrous scene of the classroom, making this scenery where nothing was broken look even stranger.

".....Tsubaki, I'm sorry."

"I don't know why you're apologizing, it's fine, I don't care anymore.....but, where can we escape to....."

He didn't have a destination. If they went outside it was possible they could be attacked by an akujiki, but it would be dangerous if they didn't keep going. Tougo was at a loss as they continued on. He could hear the loud sounds of things breaking from behind him. There wasn't time to look back. The light of the moon barely illuminated the dark hallway. It was already near its zenith, so it must have been past midnight. He had lost his concept of time. As they continued down the hallway, he suddenly heard a voice. It was an unfamiliar voice of a dignified of a young girl.

—Over here

"Huh.....?"


—Over here

He didn't see anyone. The world suddenly fell into silence, only that voice clearly reached Tougo's ears. Yue seemed to have lost consciousness. His slender body was extremely heavy.

—Fufu.....there's no need to be afraid, dear child. Come this way.....

Tougo took a step forward as if he were being lured away.

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

 frillyfujoshitranslations.tumblr.com/post/138469161812/akaya-akashiya-ayakashino-kagekui-machi-no

Chapter 8 Separate Voices

He was inside of darkness. It felt like he was floating in the depths of the night. Even though he should have been going down the school steps, before Tougo knew it, he was standing in front of the red torii that continued on endlessly. He was below the familiar plaque at the entrance of the shrine that read, *Utsuwa Inari*. When he looked closely, there was pale blue moonlight shining between the torii. It was the place he had chased after Yue. He didn't visit it much anymore, but it was the place he came unknown to anyone else—almost every day—seven years ago.

"I remember....."

When Akane went missing, someone from the neighborhood said they saw them around here. Relying on that offhand statement, the young Tougo would come here whenever he could find the time. He would climb up the long stone staircase with his small feet, asking around about his mother's whereabouts. In the end, no one could answer his pleading. He must have thought he could have brought her home if he had found her. When he thought about that childish plan now, it was absurd enough to make him laugh. His disappointment repeated every day, but it certainly planted the seeds of hopelessness and resignation into Tougo.

His legs hesitated climbing the stone steps. The sad memories that etched themselves into Tougo's mind many times, wrapped around him coldly. The voice of a young girl reached his ears.

—*There is nothing to worry about. There is not a single thing to fear*

"That's probably true.....but, I must have been scared back then."

—*You used to come to look for you mother, didn't you, child*

"Yes. But.....in the end, I couldn't find her, everyone told me I must have been mistaken, to forget about her already."

A child searching for his mother until late in the evening probably invited the pity of adults. They must have all told him he was mistaken because they knew Akane would never be coming back. They may not have been able to tell a child of such a tender age that the truth was she had ran off with another man.

"That's why I forgot.....I wanted to forget. That was for the best, because Akane didn't plan on coming back."

—*Ooh.....why is that?*

"Because....."

He recalled the feel of his hand being held. The palms of his childish hands had become much larger since then. They were definitely bigger than his mother's hands from that time. His mother was in her last month of pregnancy. She had a new and small life residing in her womb when they went out to the festival holding hands. The two of them walked among the sound of the festival band. Tougo was light on his feet as he wondered if they would be able to come next year, all of them, his father who couldn't make it this time included. Even so, out of all people, his mother left him behind. She didn't turn around even once, the voice of her son who was concerned about her pregnancy didn't reach her.

"Because, she chose Yoshiki."

—*How sad. Surely you have felt nothing but pain*

His hopelessness only became worse. Tougo had always been alone ever since that day. He felt as though he would lose something again by coming here.

—*Over here*

The young girl's voice called to Tougo. Still limp, Yue didn't say a word, but he could definitely feel his body heat. He was immensely heavy against his shoulder, but he could feel his chest moving against his body as he breathed.

"I wonder what I'll lose this time."

—*Worry not, child. Come this way. You won't lose a thing.....if you come to me, you will know all.....*

Her tone was gentle, as if she were trying to soothe Tougo. With his body full of exhaustion and pain, he honestly didn't have the energy to question what was right or wrong. At any rate, he had come this far, so Tougo had no room to choose.

—*I will tell you everything you want to know, my dear child. I'll heal your wounds as well.....*

Her voice tempted him. It was an awfully enticing invitation to Tougo.

"If I go to you, will you help this guy?"

—*Of course. As you wish*

He lifted Yue back up on his shoulder, making up his mind. The gravel crunched under the soles of his shoes.

All he saw was the red of the torii. Their glossy vermillion color continued on forever. He took one step.

"Mn.....Tsubaki? Where is everyone.....?"

Slumped over, Yue weakly lifted his face.

"They're all right.....I think they're still at the school."

"That's good. Are you all right, Tsubaki?"

Yue was weak, but he smiled, concerned about Tougo's well-being. Instead of answering, Tougo nodded back as he continued his steps.

The damp late night air was cold. A white fog wrapped around them. He felt his body chill when his lungs breathed it in.

—*Now, come to me. It's dark, so watch your step*

"Miko-sama....."

Yue seemed to be able to hear the voice as well.

"You know her?"

".....yeah. She's the.....person.....who raised me."

The Utsuwa Shrine Tougo knew was normally a quiet place that few people visited. The only time it was crowded was during the annual winter festival, but usually people were rarely seen there. That's why he couldn't understand how Yue lived there, but the story seemed to be true. The reason Yue's words were hesitant must have been

because she wasn't actually a *person*.

"Tsubaki. You shouldn't be here. Go home."

"Don't worry. I'm helping you this time.....that's why I came here."

Tougo had changed his wish decidedly. This wasn't the time to be paralyzed by fear. Refusing to listen to his pleading, he continued onward.

"Don't.....if you come here..."

I won't be able to keep my promise, Yue protested. It drove Tougo a little crazy that Yue was still saying he would protect him despite having wounds all over his body. He originally got close to Tougo in order to eat him, so he must have been someone full of contradictions. Since Yue was resisting even in his feeble state, Tougo became even more unstable than he already was in his own condition. He barely managed to keep his balance by leaning his back against a nearby torii. Pain ran through his sprained ankle.

".....d-don't struggle. I'm injured too, you know."

"Sorry, but..."

"It's fine. I've already decided."

Yue lost his words at Tougo's unusually forceful tone.

"Look, they're calling us. Let's go."

".....okay."

As they dragged their tangled feet, the two of them began to walk once again.

The night darkened. He could no longer tell if it was night, darkness, or shadow. The scenery between the toriis disappeared, all he saw was emptiness whether he looked back or ahead. He only saw the red of the toriis. With their extreme vibrancy, they didn't look like they were a part of this world. This place was no longer the path of torii Tougo was familiar with. He just continued to walk down the path to another world that may have gone on forever. Before he knew it, the pain in his ankle was gone, and even the fatigue weighing down his body was fading. Yue's body also felt somewhat lighter. When he looked at him, he seemed to be able to walk on his own feet just a little.

Once they started walking, they slipped into the fog as memories of the past came and went. The past he didn't want to know about tormented Tougo like a day dream, but he had no way to escape them. Vague figures of people appeared before his eyes.

—*Yoshiki.....Yoshiki*

It was Akane's voice.

—*I know it's you. You're Yoshiki, right?*

It was a scene unknown to Tougo. There was no one at the park during the evening other than those two. With his back turned to Tougo, he was unable to make out Yoshiki's expression. He must have been making the same troubled face he made so long ago.

—*Akane-chan.....*

—I've finally found you, Yoshiki. Why did you suddenly disappear from me?

Akane drew closer in order to cling to him, but Yoshiki took half a step back. He behaved as if he were afraid of being touched.

—I've been searching for you all this time.....you vanished without a word. Yaiichi said you had definitely been "spirited away"

He remembered what Yaiichi had spoken about. He told him that Yoshiki disappeared when Akane was still a child. The Yoshiki Tougo knew looked around his own current age. He looked the same age as Akane here. According to Yaiichi's story, he should have been older than her.

"Spirited away....."

Tougo's voice was erased by the sunset spreading out before his eyes.

—Still.....still, you came back

Akane's voice shook. She must have been overjoyed. However, she must have also been just as confused.

—You look the same as you did back then.....

People who had been spirited away never came back. That was what he had been told. That was also what Tougo believed. He would have never guessed this person who looked basically human had once been taken away. Akane took another step toward Yoshiki. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to feel the warmth of the person she lost with her own hands, and make sure he was really there. Tougo understood that feeling almost painfully. Not allowing it, Yoshiki clearly refused her.

—I am no longer.....a human belonging to this world

There was no way telling someone they weren't human wasn't accompanied with pain. This was probably why Yoshiki had asked Tougo not to tell his parents about him. It may have also been the reason why he protected Tougo without ever meeting him.

—Why, Yoshiki?

Akane's voice shook as she squeezed out those words after a brief silence. It wasn't sad. It wasn't sorrowful, or sympathetic.....her voice was purely angry. The corners of her eyes were red and damp, but Akane didn't cry.

—I promised

Yoshiki spoke.

—I promised Akari-san—I promised your mother.....that I would protect you, Akane-chan

His tone was calm, but it was also certain. He made it known that he had no intention of listening to anyone else's argument about it.

—Is that why you left me? To become my replacement?

Her tone demanded an explanation. Yoshiki retreated away from her, his back hitting the playground horizontal bar. Akane leaned forward, a breath's width from Yoshiki, without touching him she spoke.

—Did you let the fox eat you in my place?

“!”

Tougo gasped at the immense turbulence of those words. He felt his vision turn crimson.

“What.....is this.....”

Had this event really taken place? There was no room to doubt what was so clear before his eyes. His head hurt as if it had been struck. Yue silently watched the scene ahead of them.

—*If that’s the case, can’t we go back to the way things were now?*

Akane clung to him. Her voice was trembling. Yoshiki silently shook his head.

—.....*then why did you appear before me?why did you show up in front of Tougo?*

Yoshiki didn’t respond.

—*Hey, Yoshiki*

Tougo felt as though he didn’t want to see any more than this. No matter who was spinning this tale, the reality was just too gruesome.

—*You’re looking for your “meal” too, aren’t you?*

Yoshiki’s shoulders shook in surprise. He may not have wanted to hear those words coming from Akane’s mouth.

—*Isn’t that right? The same as my mother*

Opposite of Yoshiki’s apprehension, Akane’s mouth lifted into a smile. Night started to fall in that park.

“Meal.....”

The world Tougo had heard several times over the past few days fell from his mouth in a daze.

“.....a vessel...to house the soul of the white fox who lost his body.”

Yue muttered. Unable to understand what he meant, Tougo questioned him back.

“A yorishiro.....a person’s body becomes a vessel to protect his life.”

“.....Yue?”

“There is a fox living inside of us. He’s been changing bodies over and over again since long, long ago.”

Yue finally faced Tougo when he called his name. His faint eyebrows, the same pale color as his hair, looked as if they were concealing the true nature residing in his eyes. Yue spoke his words indifferently.

“By us, you mean.....”

“Yoshiki-san, and now, me.”

“There have always been people eaten for this purpose.....through the ritual of having a *meal*.”

“Yoshiki, and you.....?”

“Yes. There were a lot of others too.”

It suddenly became difficult to believe.

—*Sorry*

That wasn't my intention, Yoshiki apologized.

I really didn't plan on ever being seen again.

He certainly always hid whenever he would save Tougo. He had never seen what was under his hyottoko mask even once.

—*I won't ever show up in front of you all again, so don't worry*

When he tried to leave, Akane grabbed his sleeve to stop him.

—*No*

Yoshiki watched the clothes she was grasping so tightly her finger tips turned white with a troubled expression. Since it was just the strength of a small woman, he should have been able to shake her off. However, Yoshiki waited for Akane to move away as he kept quiet.

—*Hey, Yoshiki. Have you already found your replacement? Your meal?*

Akane asked without taking her hand away.

—*That's.....*

—*Eventually you'll have to find one, won't you? In that case.....*

Night had fallen at the park, it was dark, so he could no longer make out Akane's expression. Only her voice was clear in the darkness.

I don't want to hear it, he thought.

He knew there was no escaping it.

—*I can make you one.....a yorishiro...to replace you*

Akane said cheerfully like a child who thought of a grand idea. She pulled Yoshiki's kimono hard, drawing Yoshiki's body toward her, and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her arms floating dimly in the darkness were like snakes. Yoshiki struggled to escape those pair of snakes entwined around him, but was unsuccessful.

—*Ufufu.....what do you think of my idea?*

—*We can't...do that*

—*Why?*

Akane tilted her head like a little girl.

—*There shouldn't be a problem with our bloodline. We're both descendants of the Tsubaki family.....*

She stroked Yoshiki's cheek then embraced him tightly with those pale arms. Yoshiki gave up his resistance.

—*Let go, Akane-chan*

Akane gently declined Yoshiki's request.

“Replacement.....?”

The one who answered Tougo’s dumbfounded question was the voice of a young girl.

—*That’s right. In order to release Yoshiki, she became pregnant with a new life. That was Yue*

That voice readily confirmed the incident he didn’t want to believe. When Akane was still at home, he would touch her round stomach, anxiously awaiting the eventual birth. There was no way that was Yue.

“But, she disappeared only seven years ago!”

Yue standing before his eyes was a boy of sixteen or seventeen years old. He didn’t look any different from Tougo. He certainly didn’t look like a child born a mere seven years ago.

—*That would be right, if he were a normal human child anyway.....*

“Then this guy is what!?”

—*He is your true younger brother*

“Tsubaki, that’s why...”

There was that feeling of déjà vu when they met at the festival. The reason he wanted to meet Tougo so badly was because of the blood of someone unknown to him flowing through his body, Yue informed him.

“I always felt nostalgic.”

“What are you talking about, that’s insane!”

“It’s not insane at all, Tsubaki. Because.....”

—*What do you think a new yorishiro born to house the soul of a fox has for its first meal?*

The young girl interrupted Yue’s explanation, continuing for him.

“Huh.....?”

—*Yue was just a small baby. He wasn’t big enough to contain him. With the lives of two people.....he grew to be this big in no time*

“That’s.....impossible.”

—*Hearing this all of a sudden may be difficult for you to believe, but well, it is the truth. It may be something unimaginable for a human child though*

All that was happening was difficult for him to believe. Unable to attach reason to any of it, he felt dizzy. He started to feel as though he was much better off not knowing. If he didn’t know anything, he could have just continued to resent Akane and Yoshiki. That may have been what someone had thought was best as well.

“Hey, Tsubaki. My father, and our mother inside of me.....were glad they were able to see you.”

Being with you, Tsubaki, made me feel warm here.

Yue closed his eyes, and put a hand to his chest.

“I could tell those two were happy.”

“.....stop messing with me! This story, is way too insane.”

“.....Tsubaki.....”

Yue seemed to be looking for the right words. Tougo knew he was unable to express himself. It was difficult to accept all of a sudden, but there was a part of him that couldn't refuse it either.

“There's no way I can believe that.”

Even so, he wanted to refuse it. If he accepted it, everything Tougo believed would be destroyed.

—*Be calm, child of the Tsubakis. Yoshiki was always concerned about you*

The voice was indifferent to Tougo's confusion and continued.

—*I watched over you all in his place. I used one of my tails to protect you. If I recall correctly, you certainly have not been attacked by monsters since that festival day*

—*I also granted their sincerest wish to see you*

Yue was quiet. His face was calm.

“You.....you really ate them.....?”

“I had just been born.....since I was so young, I don't remember.”

Yue spoke slowly.

“But, there are so many memories inside of me.....their emotions and thoughts still live on. They would always wish to see you.....even now.”

He remembered Yaiichi's words from the other day.

—*People don't disappear like this out of selfishness, but to protect those most important to them.*

Could he really believe he was speaking for Yoshiki and Akane? Yue's words were kind, he was telling Tougo, who always believed they had betrayed him, that they didn't really abandon him. If he was saying they actually loved him, he wanted to believe it, but...

“You really ate them.....!? Stop, why are you tell me all this now!?”

On the other hand, he had always believed they were living elsewhere, Tougo couldn't accept they were already gone from this world.

“But, they ran off together, they abandoned us, and you're saying.....I'll never see them again.....?”

Keeping his composure, Tougo squeezed out his fading voice. There was only one thing he couldn't accept.

“So, why do Yaiichi and I remember them?”

When the principal disappeared, everyone around him forgot he existed. There was no trace of him, as if he had never existed in the first place. Tougo, however, remembered Akane. So did Yaiichi, and the people in their neighborhood.

“That's because the two of them couldn't fit inside of my vessel. Not all of my father and our mother are inside me.

Just one of either of them wouldn't have been enough."

"What the hell....."

"That may be why. I didn't know how you felt, Tsubaki. I must have hurt you a lot."

His feet that should have been walking stopped, and his tightly knit brows trembled. He didn't think he was crying, but the corners of his eyes became hot.

"Tsubaki."

Yue, who had been leaning his body against Tougo, moved away and looked back at him. He slowly put his hand against his now pale cheek.

"Tsubaki, I'm sorry....."

The palm of his hand was cold. It stung the light scrape on his skin a little. Just who did that voice and that hand belong to? Tougo thought in his pounding head. He thought they were Yue's. He was filled with Akane and Yoshiki's memories. If their emotions were still living on, the Yue Tougo knew may not have even existed in the first place.

"That's why I'm going to end it now."

When he took his hand away from his cheek, Yue turned away from Tougo. He faced the direction they had been walking towards.

"Because I'm going to make sure I keep my promise."

He wondered who it really was smiling right now. Perhaps the one who had found the pinwheel by his feet that day.

"Huh.....?"

"I'll protect you, Tsubaki."

The reason those words he told him repeatedly were so terribly sad must have been because they weren't Yue's own.

There were red flowers blooming in this pitch black world. There were no stars above. He noticed there was water under his feet, as still as a mirror. It was strange that his toes weren't sinking beneath the surface of the water. It was like he was standing on normal ground. Ripples spread whenever he took a step. There were clusters of spider lilies blooming all around the water's edge. They were autumn flowers, but they were in full bloom even though it was the middle of winter. He could see a mist of red continue on to the horizon. In the middle of his view was a pair of camellia trees. One of them was beautifully in full bloom, the other had no flowers and was withered. There appeared to be fallen petals floating on the water surface. The red there looked like flowing blood.

"Welcome, child of the Tsubakis."

The voice that had been guiding Tougo now physically reached his ears. When he lifted his face, there was a small girl standing on top of the water's surface under the blooming camellia tree. Her bobbed hair, ears and numerous tails were all a silvery white. She was clearly not human. She was a child, but had an unusual presence. He assumed from her impressive grace that she wasn't actually a child despite her looks. The young fox girl moved her gaze to Yue before she thanked Tougo.

"You brought him as promised."

“Miko-sama.....”

“Fufu.....pleased to meet you. You’ve finally arrived, it must have been difficult to make it this far.”

“You.....”

“I am the one who watches over the children of Utsuwa.....You may call me Mikoto for now. I seem to also be called the goddess of the mountain by your kind.”

“Goddess of the mountain.....”

The one who resides in this shrine, Mikoto told him.

When he thought about it, even if they weren’t deities, it wouldn’t be unusual for animals like foxes and raccoons to live at a shrine with very few people. They probably had been there since long, long ago, eating people from the town who called the phenomenon being *spirited away*.

“Yue was raised in this shrine.....I suppose I’m something like a parent to him.”

Mikoto boasted proudly. Whatever the reason, Yue being raised at the shrine didn’t seem to be a lie.

“I must thank you for bringing him here.....aah, you’re a mess, Yue. This is why you shouldn’t push yourself.”

Mikoto dusted off Yue’s clothes. One of his geta had fallen off at some point, dirt clinging to him here and there. The red marks and scratches where he had been hit on his pale skin looked painful. When he suddenly looked at his ankle, Tougo saw the bandage he had wrapped him up with. It was the remains of when he attended to his injuries with unusual care. He must have still had the wound he received while protecting Tougo.

“.....”

“Now then, Yue. Let’s begin our meal.”

Mikoto told him. Her voice was dignified, but Tougo could sense a restless ecstasy within it. She was excited—happy. The way she said *meal* gave a clear impression that it involved everyone present.

“If you don’t hurry, that body won’t last much longer. If you don’t.....you probably already know, even if I don’t tell you.”

Tougo felt a chill go down his back. Gradually, that heaviness weighed down his stomach.

“.....Miko-sama, I.....”

Mikoto was concerned about Yue, but he wouldn’t respond to her.

“This boy bravely offered his body to protect you. I am certain he will be delicious.”

“Miko-sama.”

Setting aside the topic of their discussion, Mikoto seemed like a young girl who could not be reasoned with.

“If you want to eat me so badly, then do it. You *should* eat me.”

“No, wait, Tsubaki.”

Tougo came closer to the indecisive Yue.

“Hey, hurry up.”

“Tsubaki!”

Yue reflexively tried to move away from him, but fell onto his backside. He called Tougo’s name without taking his eyes away from him. Mikoto tilted her head as she watched. She looked as though she couldn’t understand what was going on. Her face looked somewhat hurt, like a pouting child who had something valuable taken away from them.

“What’s the matter, Yue? Why are you refusing your meal?”

“I’m sorry, Miko-sama. I’ve been thinking about it the whole time. Ever since I met Tsubaki in the town.”

This was the first time Tougo had heard those words from Yue. He continued his simple words. He lowered his head, his modest eyelashes trembling at times when he blinked.

“I’m sure Tsubaki would be really tasty if I ate him. He would certainly be together.....with my dad and our mom inside me. I would be happy too, and become a more stable yorishiro.....that would probably be best.”

Mikoto nodded. The corners of her small rouge lips lifted into a smile, confirming Yue’s understanding.

“But, eventually, I’ll have to find another meal. I’ll have to eat another person I like.....I don’t know if that yorishiro will be me or not, but.....that’s kind of sad.”

“Yue.....”

“Tsubaki, I’m sure Yoshiki felt the same way.”

Because actually eating something that you love enough to want to eat is wrong.

Yue looked at Tougo. One by one, the camellia flowers fell onto the water surface. A petal fluttered down, brushing Yue’s cheek. Mikoto looked up at the branch raining down flowers. Its red was dull, compared to the other tree beside it. It really did look like it was weakening. Mikoto ran her fingertips along the thin branch, as if she were doing so to a loved one.

“I’m most likely human. I may not find meals as delicious as you and the others, Miko-sama. Searching for a way Tougo can grow up to be an adult, eat yummy foods, and have fun is much better than having my meal just so we can be together all the time. That would make me much happier.”

Yue stopped his words briefly.

“That’s why I won’t have my meal.”

“Yue.....”

Mikoto shook her head sadly. She looked as though she would cry, but no tears flowed.

“This tree is you.”

Tougo looked up at the branch Mikoto was indicating. It was a sickly and weak tree. He could imagine that it was once a beautiful tree with branches full of blooming flowers during its prime. Compared to that, it’s current state was pitiful.

“It is you, me, and my twin brother. It looks like it could wither away at any moment.....Yue, have your meal.”

“Miko-sama.....sorry. Please return Tsubaki to his world.”

Yue's expression was vaguely cheerful.

"I really thought I could have my meal, but.....it looks like it's impossible after all."

Don't pass through the torii, Yue told him.

I'll keep my promise.

He seemed to be fulfilling it now. Tougo's doubts continued, he obstinately refused his promise. It wasn't coming from anyone other than Yue himself, but it contradicted Tougo's own decision. He had also decided to protect Yue.

"Idiot, what are you saying!? You're still a child. You've only gone to the festival once, the only food you've eaten out in the town was my cooking.....there's still so much you can do."

"It's fine, I was born for your sake, Tsubaki. That's why..."

"That wasn't by your own choice!"

Fufu, Yue laughed. It wasn't his usual vaguely troubled smile, he looked rejuvenated. He wanted to see Yue make that face more.

"I had fun. Playing tag in the park, eating your food. I have no regrets, but.....I would have liked to eat more of your karaage from then....."

"I told you before I'd make you as much as you want."

"Yeah. I was really happy. Thank you."

He was overflowing with regret. Tougo was tormented by a sense of helplessness, by the things he had no control over, by the things he couldn't do. Everything.

"Tsubaki's cooking must have been my true *meal*."

Perhaps realizing Yue had his mind set, Mikoto seemed to give up.

"Good grief.....you really are a hopeless child.....well, Yue, I guess we will have to look for a new yorishiro."

She seemed to decide to leave Yue be.

"That was not what I had in mind, but you won't have your meal. No matter how much I try to convince you, it would just be pointless."

Mikoto scooped up a flower petal that had fallen onto the water into her small hand. The red flower clung to her pale skin. When it fell from her hand, the petal stuck to the sleeve of her kimono like blood. Mikoto looked up at the tree, stroking it.

"Please wait just a little longer. We will definitely find you a new body."

"!"

As soon as she finished speaking, the space around them suddenly warped. The water surface wrapped in the pitch black silence rippled, sending a line splitting right through it. A silhouette of a person appeared in the wavering spot. The world was shaken by an intruder. The ear piercing silence was broken, the clusters of spider lilies shook, their stalks crumbling.

“That won’t be necessary.”

The shadow told Mikoto quietly, standing right behind her.

“Who are you?”

Mikoto asked without turning around. Her tone was as if she knew that person all along.

“It’s been a while, fox monster. That was quite the greeting though, wasn’t it?”

The hem of his long coat fluttered, that man—Sagano whispered to Mikoto.

“So we meet again. It’s strange how all the Tsubaki children gather here.”

“Says the culprit so brazenly.”

Mikoto brushed away the pole aimed at her neck and glared at the man. They appeared to be old acquaintances, but their relationship didn’t seem to be amiable.

“I didn’t come here because I wanted to. This one led me here.”

“Hina!?”

Sagano jerked his chin to a girl Tougo recognized as his little sister rushing up to him.

“She didn’t notice me following behind her at all, what a stupid tail you have.”

“Miko-sama, sorry. I was worried about oniichan.....”

“.....huh?”

Tougo once again couldn’t believe his ears. Sagano scoffed.

“Did you really believe this was your little sister?”

“Hina, you.....”

“She’s this fox monster’s underling. That way the other lowlifes wouldn’t lay a hand on you, and you could be given to this flower fanatic.”

No one denied what Sagano explained so thoroughly.

“That’s impossible.”

Even though he thought nothing else could surprise him anymore, the tips of Tougo’s fingers wouldn’t stop shaking. He certainly didn’t know where Hina came from. He believed she was his sister from another mother, but he never could have dreamed she was another one of these mononoke.

“Thank you for all your hard work as guardian. You may return to me now.”

His young sister was ordered by Mikoto. She then turned to Yue.

“.....Yue-kun.....please protect oniichan.”

“Yes. I promise.”

Hina nodded with a wide smile. Her small lips told him thank you. Her large eyes looked at Tougo. There were tears

in those clear eyes. The days he spent with Hina weren't all that long, only a few years. The baby that helped him bury Akane's absence grew in no time, and immediately became an indispensable part of the Tsubaki family. He wanted someone to say the days he spent with her wouldn't lose their value no matter what her true nature was. If they did, he felt like he would be saved even just a little.

"Hina....."

With no time to say his goodbyes, the young girl disappeared.

"Don't worry. Your little sister has just returned home."

Mikoto's words didn't comfort Tougo.

"She was one of my nine tails. She was used to protect you all, as a guardian.....she no longer needs to fulfill that duty though."

Since Yue declined to have his meal, she laughed bitterly to herself.

I can't believe she led this man here though, she continued.

Mikoto turned to Sagano.

"Now then, please give back my little brother's body.....that way we can return his soul to the correct form."

"I told you that won't be necessary. Let's end this already. Looks like that guy wants the same."

"Fufu, no. We need the flowers to bloom once again."

Sagano swung his pole with all his strength. The space shook harshly, the same as when he appeared. The flowers were mowed down, their leaves scattering. Large ripples formed on the water surface. His attack sent out shock waves, disrupting the space.

"Sagano-san....."

"Vessel. You can disappear with that guy inside you!"

"I won't allow your selfishness, child. I fed you my flowers once after all."

Mikoto accepted his challenge, the surface of the water no longer still as a mirror. Tougo sunk down as the world crumbled. His knees hit the surface, his hips fell. His body was heavy and could no longer move. When he looked into the swaying water, he saw pale white arms. He saw the bodies of people who seemed to be sleeping. He recognized them from his memories. They had tranquil expressions. He couldn't believe they would never wake up again. Their bodies sunk to the depths of the lake. They were probably happy their souls were sleeping inside of their own child. Even if this wasn't how they wanted things to end.

"Akane.....Yoshiki.....hey, will I be able to go there with you too.....?"

That question unconsciously escaped his mouth.

"No, because I won't eat you, Tsubaki."

"You're saying that sort of thing again....."

"I don't need a replacement anymore."

"....."

Tougo couldn't understand how he could still smile like that with his body covered in wounds. He got close to him so he could eat him in the first place, he should have just eaten him. That would have made things much easier. When he told him that, Yue shook his head.

"Looks like we're both stubborn.....must be because we're brothers."

"....."

"Hey, oniichan."

A strong wind shook their world once again. It looked like Sagano's strength was overpowering Mikoto. She fought on the defensive as she was cornered, protecting the camellia tree.

"Run away while Miko-sama fights him off. Once you leave here, keep going without looking back."

"I love you, Tsubaki, but I'm glad I didn't eat you."

Swept up in the moment as well, Tougo smiled quietly. Yue pushed his hand against his back. Tougo turned back just once.

"You should forget about me.....be well."

That was the last time he saw Yue.

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

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Chapter 9 A Gentle Conclusion

Morning arrived. The sky was so clear it was almost scary. He had never seen the sky so bright. Before he knew it, Tougo was sitting on the bench in front of the shrine bus stop. The cold air of dawn and the empty street faded his sense of reality. A morning mist spread under the clear sky, slightly obscuring his road home. His body was heavy as mud. It felt like he just had a very long dream. Tougo sluggishly lifted himself up—and started to walk. He felt a terrible emptiness. The things he couldn't get back only increased. The pain of continuous loss probably wouldn't fade with time. His heart was certainly worn out, and it tormented Tougo. Yue's voice from the moment of their parting still remained in the depths of his ears.

His supposedly ordinary days passed slowly. The wrecked classroom had a *DO NOT ENTER* rope affixed across it the next day. The police came, and as expected there was quite the ruckus, but after a few days, the broken windows and desks were replaced with new ones, making the classroom mostly the same as before. No one suspected Tougo had anything to do with it, even if anyone asked him about it, he just said he didn't know anything. He never saw another akujiki after that.

Hina didn't return. He no longer needed to kill time at the park in the evenings, or head to the kindergarten. Takahashi was curious about the wrecked classroom incident, and made up some ridiculous mystery out of it. Even Suzuki surprisingly took an interest in the stories. He could sometimes see them arguing about it during their lunch break.

Suzuki had declared that he wanted to become a fighting folklorist. Becoming a folklorist was one thing, but the addition of "fighting" attached to it confused the guidance counselor. The cut on his cheek had healed at some point. Final exams were postponed, but Tougo's grades fell from the top few names of the class. When his teachers questioned him about it, he just made up an excuse about not feeling well. Suzuki gave him his notes every day.

Every once in a while, Akiyoshi would invite him to have lunch on the roof. He never once talked about that day. They just made small talk as they ate their bentou. Tougo wasn't sure if the emptiness he felt would ever be filled. He wondered if there would be a day when he could understand his father who spoke about losing things like he was used to it. Leaning against the chain link fence on the roof alone, he looked up at the sky. The days were certainly starting to grow longer, but the wind was still cold. Spring was still far off.

"....."

Yue's words crossed his mind.

—*You should forget about me.....be well*

"Yue....."

Tougo didn't know the reason for his content smile.

"I'm home~"

The front door opened slightly. He came in with the groceries he bought for dinner at the nearby supermarket, and placed them on the floor. He took off his everyday shoes and called out as usual.

“Hey, Hina-chan!”

“Ah, right. She’s not here anymore.”

Disappointed by the lack of response, Yaiichi headed to the kitchen. Inside of the plastic bag were the popsicles his daughter loved so much. However, there was no one here to eat them. He moved the contents of the bag into the freezer as he thought about the days she lived with them.

One day a baby was left in front of their house, and Yaiichi decided to take her in without consulting anyone. A while had passed since Akane disappeared, he and Tougo were just starting to get used to living as just the two of them. When Tougo came home, Yaiichi just told him they had a new member of the family without going into detail. Tougo merely nodded without a word. Ever since then, they started their life as a three person family. The baby he named Hina grew up healthy, and Tougo looked after her like a good older brother. Life became a little more difficult with a third member of their family, but laughter had returned to the Tsubaki home. Yaiichi was happy, even if he lost Akane, even if he hadn’t known his own parents.

—Even if Hina wasn’t his daughter.

Yaiichi knew the reason Hina came to them. He didn’t just know, he raised her as his own child. She wasn’t human. She was one of those beings who took the people close to him away. Even so, he didn’t care, because she was one of the things that filled the void inside him until the time came. He had prepared himself, but the absence of his beloved daughter was sad. He would no longer go to the kindergarten to pick her up, or lend a helping hand during their events. Come to think of it, he didn’t get to keep his promise to her after all. He even managed to remember the song to the end.

“We’ve lost another.....you and I.”

He took out a small pot and the dinner preparations. The rice cooker had just started to boil. The cooking food had a warm, gentle smell. It was already starting to get dark outside, the evening news playing on the TV.

“But.....”

Yaiichi laughed quietly.

“I feel like we’re already used to it.....right, Tougo-kun?”

His son hadn’t come home from school yet.

“Akaya akashiya.....”

The pot of bok choy started to boil over. Yaiichi frantically turned off the stove. White steam arose from the hot pot. The ventilation fan whirled. It seemed to be windy outside. It must have been a developing spring storm. He remembered a night like this from before.

“Tougo-kun.....come home.”

He muttered to himself.

“Come home, before you no longer can.”

There were silhouettes of birds flying across the red sky of dusk. Akiyoshi watched the flock of birds flying off somewhere as he started to climb up the stone steps. The red torii continued on above him endlessly. The lamps carved with offering words blinked several times. Akiyoshi wasn’t sure what really happened that day. That man

Sagano chased after Hina and disappeared. Akiyoshi was left behind in the classroom with Kurogitsune. Night broke during the confusion. It was a bright morning like he had never seen before. Those were the facts Akiyoshi understood. His father was waiting for him at the front door when he got home. He must have been upset. He didn't say a word to him. Akiyoshi took the day off from school. He returned to his everyday activities. At least on the surface, nothing had changed from before. He no longer went to the park after class. He saw Tougo at school the next day as well. His face looked terribly tired, and incredibly hurt. Up until now, Tougo, who certainly continued to face betrayal due to his family's bloodline, already looked more mature than his classmates, but he looked much worse now. The best way he could describe his expression was *worn out*. His father had surprisingly praised him, and told him he did well. He told him Utsuwa was now at peace. However, Akiyoshi wasn't all that happy about it. He knew he should have been, so he responded with a smile, but his heart felt no joy.

"Achoo.....there's a lot of pollen here."

When he finished climbing the staircase, there were camellia flowers in full bloom. The rain gutters were blocked, the roof broken, and the grass overgrown. There was a neglected building with a faded torii. The reason the shrine no longer looked the way Akiyoshi knew must have been because the ones who were living there had disappeared. He saw Tougo standing absentmindedly on the stone pavement ahead. He was no longer sure how many times he had come here. This time, he came to get him.

"Tsubaki."

His dull eyes turned to him when he called.

".....Akky."

"There won't be anyone here, no matter how many times you come."

He glanced at Tougo as he stood next to him. The unruly dry grass wrapped around his feet. He looked up through the crooked branches carving into the sky.

"It's like there was nothing here to begin with."

Akiyoshi sighed.

"....."

"There's no one who remembers the people living at the shrine, that hooded man, or your little sister."

He repeated it to him as if he were trying to tell him it was a matter of fact.

"Everyone disappeared."

The dry leaves under his feet crunched softly.

".....I haven't forgotten."

He must have been thoroughly exhausted, there were faint dark circles under his eyes, and his lips were dry.

"They were definitely here."

His cracking voice sounded pained.

".....why am I always left behind?"

Those were certainly Tougo's true feelings. They screamed of a child who was constantly left behind. Akiyoshi could

only understand a fraction of the grief he felt being left alone. His chest hurt when he considered that. Even so, Akiyoshi spoke to him. There wasn't much else he could do for Tougo.

"Welcome back, Tsubaki."

"Huh? What was that all of a sudden?"

"This is how things should be. A world without ayakashi is right. That's what I think."

He knew those weren't the words Tougo was hoping for. As soon as he spoke them, Akiyoshi felt his chest ache. Tougo opened his eyes wide. His furrowed brows were painful to look at, he couldn't face him directly.

".....really? You *really* believe that?"

".....yes."

He didn't know what else to say other than to confirm.

"That's what I wanted from the beginning. That's why this is a good thing."

There was nothing else he could say. He didn't say anymore. He knew his words had hurt Tougo.

"It's not good for *me*."

"Everyone just disappears. Give me a break. I don't understand any of it....."

Akiyoshi felt the sorrow in Tougo's words.

".....Tsubaki."

"....."

A strong wind blew by during their moment of silence. The treetops rustled.

"Could you leave me alone for little while?"

Tougo spoke in a trembling voice. Akiyoshi nodded then withdrew from that spot. The sun was already setting, dying the sky with traces of dusk. It was dark around his feet, he would need to be careful as he walked.

"Tsubaki....."

It was a mysterious night with only the noise from the foliage.

A strong wind surged. Hina and Sagano disappeared from the classroom. He knew that Hina—who was a part of Mikoto, was leading him right to the shrine.

"Damn it."

Kurogitsune could no longer interfere. He wasn't in a position that would allow him to enter the shrine.

"Hey, what was that just now?"

Akiyoshi asked. Kurogitsune explained as much as he knew, but he didn't think Akiyoshi understood. Both of them had been left behind, so they were at their wit's end. The two of them knew that their fight here was meaningless.

"Whatever we do now is pointless, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah."

".....should we clean up?"

"What are you, an idiot? The people at the school will take care of it in the morning, leave it."

"....."

Since the window was broken the classroom was deathly cold. Kurogitsune looked up at the sky through the broken glass as he prayed Yue would eat Tougo. The sky was pitch black.

"Hey, small creature."

"Huh?"

Akiyoshi broke the silence.

"Why did you protect that fox mask guy?"

"Huh?"

"Of course an older brother would look after his little brother."

"That can't be true. There's no way an ayakashi and a human could be brothers."

He never thought he would ever hear a question like that from a son of the Tootchika family. He thought he would have known. There must have been secrets Akiyoshi still didn't know about. He should shut him down with the truth sooner or later, Kurogitsune thought. Aware he was being moved to kindness again, he laughed bitterly.

This isn't the story we told you up until now, but...., he started.

"Our boss lives inside of that guy. That's why I protect each generation of yorishiro.....like him. Both during Yue's time, and the guy before him."

".....this is hard to believe all of a sudden."

Akiyoshi squinted his eyes deep in thought.

It's up to you whether you believe me or not, Kurogitsune said as his tail swayed.

"It's just, that guy knew nothing of the outside world.....so I thought I'd like him to have more fun, and know more happiness. Since it was decided that guy would look for his meals, I was really excited he could go out into the town."

"And then he went after Tsubaki?"

"Yes. But, that may not have been his intention from the start."

".....I see."

Silence fell once again. At any rate, they wouldn't see eye to eye on the matter. That should have answered Akiyoshi's questions, but he let out more of his complaints.

"If he doesn't eat Tougo, that guy will probably disappear."

“.....”

“I wanted to be with Yue a little longer. That’s why I wanted him to have his meal.”

Kurogitsune picked up the fox mask that had fallen onto the floor. He wondered when he had given it to Yue. It was his precious treasure, even when Yue was wearing that mask, and always would be.

“But.....he should do what he wants.”

“Are you all right with that?”

Akiyoshi made a hurt face. Kurogitsune laughed.

It’s Yue’s choice.

“I said it was fine. Don’t make such a dark face, masked four eyes.”

“How many times have I told you to stop calling me that.....!”

“Hey.”

Kurogitsune looked outside. The sky seemed to have calmed. He sensed something had burst open from the direction of the shrine. Suddenly a wind blew by. It was more like a vortex had opened up. A powerful wind twisted, shaking the window frame.

“The shadows are moving.....that guy, Sagano, must have...”

“Hey, what are you talking about?”

Night broke with the wind. The obsidian sky split, and a clear light began to illuminate the town from above. It was a dramatic sudden change.

“Yue!”

If the shadows had disappeared, Yue could only have chosen one thing. Kurogitsune started to run.

“Akiyoshi, see you later!”

“Hey! What’s going on?”

He smacked the confused Akiyoshi’s back once.

“What are you doing!?”

“I’m all right as long as Yue is happy, but.....but I had a lot of fun.”

Kurogitsune changed back into a small fox from his human form as he ran. The wind blew against him in the opposite direction. Running with the mask in his mouth was difficult. He lost his balance several times, but he ran as fast as he could toward the mountain. The sky was clear in some areas. He needed to get to the shrine before the shadows got too far, no matter what.

He could see the moon through the rustling trees. Tougo wasn’t sure how long he had been standing still. All he could remember was he had come here right as dusk was starting. It was like that when he would come to search for Akane long ago. He would be here alone until Yaiichi came to get him. He was taller and older, but he came once

again to search for someone. It was surprising how little he had changed. He let out a laugh without thinking. There was no longer anyone here, not his mother who had been spirited away, nor the fox who did so.

—*Tougo*

He heard a voice call out to him from the darkness, and turned around. He couldn't see anyone in his surroundings. He only heard the sound of the rustling foliage. He thought he was hearing things, but that just changed into disappointment.

—*Hey, Tougo*

He faced the shrine entrance from the crumbling stone pavement. A voice came from the withered trees with the faded five colored streamers wrapped around it. He knew the owner of that voice. He noticed a dry sound of something falling by his feet. It was the fox mask Yue wore.

“.....Kurogitsune.....?”

—*Would you like to come with us?*

It was definitely Kurogitsune's voice. He could hear it between the noise of the rustling trees.

—*The mistress, everyone, is already gone. There are only so many places we can live*

Kurogitsune invited him. Invited Tougo to become one of them.

—*We have been here—in Utsuwa Mountain, since the beginning. That's why we're just returning to our roots*

There was pain in his voice. Along with a sense of loss, and regret. The same as Tougo.

—*Why don't you come with me? Like Yue, and Yoshiki. Will you come with me?*

He could probably share his loss, or at least he could bury what he was missing.

Yue is gone though, Kurogitsune told him.

—*If you want, I'll take you with me*

Instead of answering, he picked up the fox mask that had fallen by his feet. Yue always wore it. He didn't know why he wore it, or what it meant to him, just this was the only thing left behind for Tougo.

“The last thing you said to me was, I don't need a replacement.”

He spoke to Yue. He knew it wouldn't reach him.

“But.....there's no way I can go home now. I had that feeling.....the moment I took your hand.”

He felt something small jump onto his shoulder from the darkness to speak to him. It was Kurogitsune. He laughed quietly in Tougo's ear.

“If you're going to leave me behind.....all I can do is chase after you.”

He refused to be left behind ever again.

“I won't be able to grant your wish though.....”

He put the fox mask onto his face. His skin grew accustomed to the feel.

He heard the sound of a festival band in the distance. A crimson bonfire burned. There was the hustle and bustle of people. Foxes were dancing. The flames jumped, and shadows swayed. The darkness was endlessly deep.

Tougo took a step. The same as Akane. The only difference, there was no hand to pull him back.

“Take me with you.....because it’s my turn now.”

His voice quietly melted into the air, he could sense Kurogitsune nodding near his ear. The overgrowth made no sound as he took a step.

Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino - Spring Excess Short Stories - Preface

HaccaWorks* recently attended Super Comic City 25 and Comitia 116 where they passed out a new short story for AkaAka. It's now available for download on their [website](#) until June 10th~

Excess Short Stories - Preface

Koi streeeamers, hiiiigher than the rooof
The big black koi is the father, the red koi are the children
They seem to be swimming funny.....

Since the speakers in the shopping district played that song on repeat ever since the *Hina Festival* had passed, Ranchuu had completely memorized the lyrics. The cherry blossoms had just opened. There was still time before the tree buds would firm, and leisurely spread their leaves. Even so, there were koi streamers. His mood needed to catch up with the season.

He let out a small sigh. Since he had only bought heavy things like rice, vinegar, shoyu and miso, a light sweat beaded on his forehead even though the season was still unpleasantly cold.

Ranchuu passed through the torii with the plaque that read *Utsuwa Shrine* and began to climb the stairs. He realized he had been singing the koi streamer song since leaving the shopping district.

As expected, the decorative *hina* dolls Mikoto wanted so badly were put away in a hurry as she wished, so they wouldn't be late (late for what, he had no idea), but he would need to air out the samurai dolls soon, Ranchuu thought as he stopped humming. The samurai dolls, the armor and helmet sets, and then the koi streamers. He did this every year, but it was still quite a lot of work.

"Today.....probably won't be possible. Maybe tomorrow."

He had just finished scaling the stairs to the shrine, and could see where the slanted area fell to level ground. The sky was dyed a copper red.

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

 frillyfujoshitranslations.tumblr.com/post/144269274042/akaya-akashiya-ayakashino-spring-excess-stories

Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino - Spring Excess Stories - 1

1

The next morning.

After he finished tidying up after breakfast, Ranchuu headed to the storage room in the chilly weather. He opened the door at the north corner of the second floor, where no one ever entered, of the wooden main building with a noisy rattle. There were no windows, and a single bare light bulb dangled down, but it had gone out a long time ago.

“They were definitely around here.....”

He brushed away a light layer of dust then carried it out to the hall. The light of morning was blinding to his eyes that had grown accustomed to the dark.

“Ranchuu. You’re here?”

When he turned toward the voice, Satou was standing there.

“Yes, I thought I would air these out while the weather was nice. Is something wrong?”

“I received something earlier. Some live things.”

“Live things?”

“A basket of rainbow trout, and a freshwater crab.”

“.....those were?”

Apparently, the neighborhood doll shop owner usually fished in his free time, and shared some with them.

“But then.”

Satou pressed between his brows.

“The moment I opened the basket, the crab escaped.”

“.....it escaped?”

“Mikoto-sama has taken an interest in it.”

“.....Understood.”

The situation seemed to be serious. He had just taken out one of the large red koi to air out, so Ranchuu headed toward the kitchen with Satou.

Today was a day tied to fish.

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Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino - Spring Excess Short Stories - 2

2

He found something unusual.

When he came out of his room, there was a large fish before his eyes, sprawled out in the hallway.

No.

It was something like a fish, but also like a banner, laying on the floor. It seemed to be a fish colored with vivid blues and reds, however, its large glaring eyes were a little frightening, and he was unable to imagine from its looks just what it was used for.

".....hmmm."

Still sleepy, Yue blinked his eyes.

He had no idea who could have left it there. It was most likely Ranchuu, but he couldn't deny that it may have been one of Kurogitsune's pranks. Maybe he was seeing things, or still dreaming.

He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands, but the fish-like form in front of him wouldn't disappear. He hesitantly tried pulling it. It had a much lighter feel than it looked. When he got a better look at it, there were pretty gold and silver patterns drawn on each of its scales.

"Hmmm....."

The second floor hallway had a lot of sunlight, so it looked as though the fish was sunbathing. Yue wasn't sure if fish actually did that sort of thing.

“What could it be?”

The fish-like thing stared at Yue with its large mouth wide open.

“What.....could it be?”

Spoiler Warning

Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino Supplementary Book by HaccaWorks*

Comic Zero: Akashi

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Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino - Spring Excess Short Stories - 2

2

He found something unusual.

When he came out of his room, there was a large fish before his eyes, sprawled out in the hallway.

No.

It was something like a fish, but also like a banner, laying on the floor. It seemed to be a fish colored with vivid blues and reds, however, its large glaring eyes were a little frightening, and he was unable to imagine from its looks just what it was used for.

“.....hmmm.”

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Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino - Spring Excess Stories - 3

3

The Abes were in a good mood today.

When they tried pulling a fortune, a rather interesting result came out.

They were in such a good mood they almost felt like humming, but since the Abe in back would get angry, the Abe in front resisted.

Noon was close. Lunch would be served in the main building's living room soon.

Feeling as though they would enjoy having a meal in their good mood, they pulled open the door to the fortune-telling booth, and stepped in their outdoor shoes on the stone steps.

"Hm?"

There was something black moving under the greenery that had just begun to bloom with *doudantsutsuji* flowers here and there. It had large ears and a long tail. He recognized it.

".....Kurogitsune. What's up?"

It was rare for him to be on the shrine grounds in his fox form.

We were about to step on you, the Abes laughed as the creature slowly lifted its face.

"Don't say you were going to step on me!!"

He yelled, almost snapping at them before changing into his familiar young boy form.

"You didn't need to go through the trouble of changing into your human form. Either way you're small."

"Go away! Don't say you were going to step on me! Don't say you were going to kick me!"

"So, are you looking for something? What are you doing crawling on the ground?"

"Ooh. For a crab, a crab."

".....huh?"

"We were going to have deep fried freshwater crab, and fried fish at noon, so I was put in charge of finding the crab."

The Abes were unable to grasp the situation very well.

"Are we going to have to do that too?"

"Satou-sama said, those who don't work, don't eat."

"We don't really like doing more work than we have to though~"

The Abe in back scratched the side of the Abe in front's tilted head with his left hand.

Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino - Spring Excess Stories - 4

4

“Heeere, crabby, crabby, crab.”

Of course it wouldn't respond, but Kurogitsune walked along as he called down to the ground. He had almost caught the freshwater crab that had run away, and returned it to the wash bin, but it was fast and seemed to have run far away. Kurogitsune had switched places with Ranchuu who was preparing lunch, and followed its tracks.

“Come to think of it, would it even leave tracks?”

He had taken on a completely unreasonable task. Kurogitsune muttered his complaints as he ran his gaze along the ground. Since there were garden stones scattered among the greenery, there was no way he would be able to find a little crab. However, since he was told he wouldn't be having lunch if he didn't find it, he had no choice but to obediently comply.

“Heeere, crabby, crabby. Come out before Momiji eats you~”

As he continued on through the dwarf lilyturf flowers, muttering to himself in vain, his stomach growled as if it were sympathizing with him. He was going out of his way to ignore it, but he was unfortunately aware of how empty his stomach was.

“Aah, damn. I'm so hungry, I have no strength~”

He crouched down and looked up at the dazzling bright sky full of white clouds. The corner of his eye caught a glimpse of a familiar window, making him think of a person who often said the same thing.

“.....speaking of which, is that guy still sleeping?”

He muttered nonchalantly as a small crab went by him without a sound.

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Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino - Spring Excess Stories - 5

5

“Satou-sama.....why don't we have lunch soon. Everyone is getting hungry.”

Those who participated in their afternoon meal was mostly the same every time. Excluding Yue and Kurogitsune, the usual faces were all sitting on the cushions at the low table, sipping on tea with nothing else to do.

“But, we received a gift. It would be a waste not to use it.”

Your proposal is also reasonable, Ranchuu, Satou added as he looked off into the distance with his arms crossed.

It was a peaceful afternoon.

If they listened carefully, they could hear Kurogitsune's voice from the garden, calling for the crab.

“Indeed.....”

The goldfish wandered aimlessly in the air.

“Satou-san, we're hungry~”

“We want to eat~”

They unanimously complained about their hunger.

“Well, wait. We'll eat when everyone is here.”

Almost everyone was there.

Unaware of Satou's stance on not treating only the goldfish favorably, they flew about restlessly.


“Ranchuu, you say something too~”

Somewhat able and unable to understand Satou's complex feelings, Ranchuu also kept his mouth shut as he poured more tea from the small tea pot.

“We don't even eat crab.....”

At that moment, they heard the thudding footsteps of someone running down the long hallway from the back door.

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Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino - Spring Excess Stories - 6

6

“.....found it!”

THWACK! The paper screened door opened as Kurogitsune made his announcement, holding a small crab up high. Commotion ran through the room.

“.....as expected from a glutton.”

Ranchuu was secretly relieved, but went with his usual insults.

“Lunch depended on it.”

Kurogitsune smiled triumphantly, seemingly unconcerned.

“You were just being greedy. Is that something to look so proud about?”

“Now, now it’s fine, isn’t it? Thanks to Kurogitsune, it’s finally lunch time. We’re hungry.”

Once the Abes intervened, Mikoto, who had entered the room at some point, was looking closely at the crab in Kurogitsune’s raised hand.

“Still, what a fine crab.”

“Mistress.”

“Satou, Ranchuu. I’ve put you two through a lot of trouble.”

“Not at all.”

“So this is the one that ran away until the end.”

She said as she got a better look at the small crab Kurogitsune was holding out in his hand.

“Ah, yes. Will you be eating as well, Mikoto-sama?”

“Hm.....but, I’m starting to feel as though I would regret eating him.”

Satou suddenly made a grave expression.

“.....Mikoto-sama.....don’t tell me.”

“Kurogitsune. Could you put him in this fish tank?”

“Eh?”

The goldfish let out their wails.

“I like him. Ufufu, he has quite a bit of determination. He may even eventually become a spirit if he lives long

enough.”

“.....”

“Mikoto-sama.....”

He felt Satou’s exhaustion, but there was nothing Ranchuu could do.

In the end, he finished preparing lunch without the main course of one deep fried crab as everyone sat around the dining table.

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Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino - Spring Excess Stories - 7

7

“Huh, by the way, is Yue still sleeping?”

It was unusual not to see him after a lunch later than usual.

“I haven’t seen him today yet.”

Ranchuu confirmed as he served the after meal tea.

“That’s right, we had business with Yue-kun~. There was an interesting fortune result.”

“In other words, nothing important.”

“Exactly~”

“Don’t give me that. Still, he’s been sleeping for way too long. I’m gunna go wake him up.”

He ran up to the second floor with the usual sound of his footsteps against the floor boards.

“Yueeee! How long do you plan on sleeping, heeey!!!”

Once he finished climbing the stairs, he turned left.

“Wah!?”

Writhing koi streamers were covering the whole hallway. Kurogitsune stumbled, but unable to stop, ended up stepping on a blue koi. He slipped on the well polished hallway.

“Uwooooooh!???”

He slid with force along with the koi he stepped on. Even though it was only for a moment, it felt like a long time. Eventually the koi bumped into something and stopped. Kurogitsune ended up falling hard onto his backside.

“Ooow.....”

When he got up while pressing against his hips that received the hard blow, he noticed there seemed to be something inside of a disheveled red koi. Technically, he shouldn’t have bumped into anything on the koi. They were hollow on the inside after all. However, the vivid deep red of the koi was rising up.

“.....!?”

The hair on his ears and tail stood on end vigilantly. Before he could make the first move and pounce on it, his ears heard a familiar voice.

“Uwh.....”

“.....no way.”

The red koi's belly writhed.


"Mnnn.....Kurogitsune? Good morning."

The one who popped his head out from its open mouth was Yue, who should have been indulging his laziness in his room.

"Stupid Yue! Koi streamers aren't futons!!"

Kurogitsune's yelling echoed through out the mansion, so everyone suddenly knew where Yue was.

Frilly Fujoshi Translations

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Akaya Akashiya Ayakashino - Spring Excess Stories - End

End

“Huuuh, so all that happened?”

Yue finished his meal, and listened to everyone’s story. Kurogitsune stuck his chest out in pride since he was the one to catch it in the end. The crab in question had been placed inside of the goldfish’s bowl in the center of the low table.

A light green tea had been poured into the tea cups placed before them, steam rising from each one.

“Ah.”

Yue suddenly looked toward the veranda. If he wasn’t paying attention, he wouldn’t have noticed the small shadow passing by.

“AH — — — !”

Everyone present let out their voices a second too late. Inside of the fish tank was a husk it had molted at some point. Unaware of their shock, or perhaps completely aware, the crab crossed the floor boards, climbed down towards the garden, and then vanished.

“Aa~ah.”

No one went after it.

The next day, Kurogitsune caught it sunbathing around the pond. The annual battle between Kurogitsune and the koi that lived in that pond had already started. Year after year he would waste his time with it without getting bored.

“I’ll definitely capture them one day!”

When he looked up from the veranda as Kurogitsune made his proud declaration, the koi streamers fluttered. Ranchuu let out a quiet sigh.

Come to think of it, it’ll be koi season soon.